Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Corps à corps. Photographic Stories " exhibition

The "Corps à corps" exhibition (6 September 2023 – 25 March 2024) proposes a new perspective on representations of the human figure in photography, through a dialogue between the Centre Pompidou collection and that of Marin Karmitz. In this podcast, the exhibition's curator Julie Jones addresses the themes of the exhibition and presents several works.
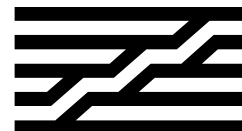
Colour code:

In black, Julie Jones's voice

In blue, the narrative voice

In purple, the musical excerpts

In red, all the other sound indications

Podcast transcription

Reading time: 10 minutes

[jingle of the show] Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears. You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou.

This Centre Pompidou podcast accompanies the "Corps à corps. Photographic Stories" exhibition, presented from 6 September 2023 to 25 March 2024. Julie Jones, curator of this exhibition and at the photography department of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, introduces the seven sections and comments for us a selection of works. Enjoy the podcast!

The "Corps à corps" exhibition offers an original and transversal view of representations of the human figure in the 20th and 21st centuries, through a dialogue between two photography collections – the public collection of the Centre Pompidou-Musée national d'art moderne, and the private one belonging to collector Marin Karmitz, a major figure in European cinema.

How these two distinct collections are complementary? What new historical narratives and fresh insights into an artist's work can emerge from this combination? When placed together, how can they activate the works differently and engage the public? The Marin Karmitz photography collection complements that of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in more than one way. It features a number of important works that are missing from the MNAM collections, some of them rare and of significant heritage value.

This private collection reveals a constant interest in the portrayal of the world and its inhabitants. History is an underlying theme throughout the exhibition: social and political struggles, successive crises and traumatic events necessarily influence our way of being and living together in the world, and our images testify to that. These images contribute to defining identities and how they are seen and remembered.
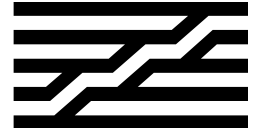
They also engage the responsibility of their authors, and consequently, their viewers. What story can be told with these images? The choice was to confront these works with one another, showing how they are never sufficient by themselves and must be activated, by all means possible. The aim is to highlight the correspondence between artists, both well-known and less so, who, whether in the same or different time periods, share the same attention in choosing subjects, styles and ways of encountering the Other.

The dialogues displayed here tell a story of how we look at this Other, and sometimes at ourselves. They allow multiple interpretations, readings and stories (both historic and personal). This exhibition poses the fundamental question of seeing. Not only *what* do we see, but also *how*, *whom*, and above all *with whom*, do we see? [transitional sound]


1 – The first faces

To photograph someone is to enter into contact with them, discover a body, with a certain level of intimacy. A photograph of a face, in particular, sheds light on our relationship with the Other. In the early 20th century, the face became a recurring motif in the work of avant-garde photographers. The power of its expression was emphasized through very close-up shots and radical interplay between light and shade, using large-format devices or lightweight, sometimes hidden cameras.

Some of these images serve a documentary purpose, while others are simple studies in form and poetry. All testify to a very strong relationship with the subject, a desire to reveal the individual's identity in its full complexity. These two trends can be observed in the works in this first section of the exhibition. [transitional sound]

Lewis Hine's work at the entrance to the section embodies this particular attention to the individual. This photographer was initially a sociology professor in New York from 1901, and devoted his work to fighting poverty in the United States in the first half of
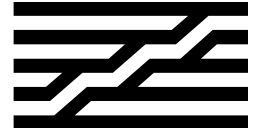
the 20th century. Starting in 1904, Hine would take his heavy photographic chamber to Ellis Island off the Manhattan coast and photograph European immigrants setting foot on American soil. [transitional sound]

A few years later, he started to collaborate with the National Child Labor Committee, an organisation that worked to denounce the extreme precarity of children forced to work in the United States. The photographer travelled the country and distributed his images, organising public projections and creating photomontages to illustrate panels in exhibitions. He was a forerunner of the socially engaged documentary practice that would emerge in the interwar period among other photographers. [transitional sound]

Further on in this section, the portrait of Nusch Eluard by Dora Maar shows another way of approaching the face in the early 20th century. This photograph stands out by its audacious framing and subtle composition between shadow and light.
It demonstrates the formal research undertaken by photographers who were close to the Surrealists. This eye-catching portrait has been widely distributed and used in multiple ways over the years. In 1947, a few months after the death of his wife Nusch, poet Paul Eluard included this portrait in the book Le temps déborde, which he dedicated to her. [transitional sound]

2 – Automatism?

The second section of the exhibition brings together works that show how artists used and diverted the traditional codes of the portrait and self-portrait, as defined when the first photobooths appeared. These automatic photography machines were installed in Paris in the late 1920s. The Surrealists were the first to create art using this fun and popular process.
Although the photobooth produces uniform images, often for administrative and police checks, for them it became a space of great freedom and subversion. Its ability to capture the subject's identity automatically, in a standardised, serial way, would fascinate a number of artists in the years to come, through to the present day.
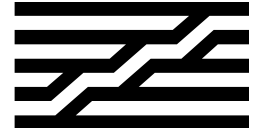
In contrast to the cold, ID photo, artists responded with humour or by diverting these codes. Staging became a true arena for experimentation. Some used this aesthetic to make a statement about their own history or relationship to time. Others used it to reveal relationships of domination in society. The serial nature of the photographs and desire to perform in the booth are central to the works presented in this section. [transitional sound]

The artwork *27 possibilités d'autoportrait* by Christian Boltanski is iconic. The artist makes use of the front-facing aesthetic of the ID portrait to consider the ties between generations, while offering a disturbing portrayal of himself. To create his *27 possibilités d'autoportrait*, he combined photos of his face from different periods of his life. The way in which the photographer reorganises the portraits is a meditation on the indeterminate nature of identity. The ritual aspect of this act, repeated 27 times, enhances the dramatic aspect of this multiple self-portrait between past, present and future. [transitional sound]

Further on in this section, we can see how the Dutch artist Hans Eijkelboom questioned self-representation differently. In 1976, he contacted former acquaintances through his assistant. Each person was asked what they would imagine Eijkelboom to be doing now. Using each person's answer, the artist staged himself ten times in the role corresponding to each response: far-left activist, electrician, forest ranger or banker. The Identity series reveals these imagined avatars, as well as the artist's love of performance. [transitional sound]

3 – Flashes

What distance should be adopted to photograph an individual? What relationship should be established with the subject? Where should the photographer position themselves? Camera in hand, photographers isolate a moment from the world around them and capture it. The act of taking a photograph therefore implies a responsibility of the photographer towards the subject.
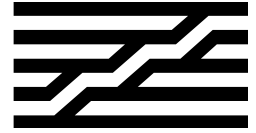
Starting in the interwar period, the street became an important place for addressing the photographer-subject relationship. Whether ambling randomly or taking a more directed approach, photographers sought to reveal individualities. This quest could take the form of a genuine hunt when the photographer "steals" the image.

Sometimes, people would overtly resist being tracked in this way. But the quest for portraits also acts to reveal each person's emotions. As a discreet witness who blends into the crowd, photographers reveal the solitude and doubts in the people surrounding them. Each artist operates according to their own protocol. All these bodies – stopped or in movement, from the back or the front – spark questions around the ethical and the aesthetic questions beneath the photographer-subject relationship.
[transitional sound]

This tension is shown in the work of American press photographer W. Eugene Smith. In the mid-1950s, he left *Life* magazine and made a major shift in his work, which became more personal. In 1957, he moved to a building on 6th Avenue in New York. Equipped with six different cameras, he watched the passers-by from the window of his apartment. Patiently, he played with the exterior light and depth of field, capturing the comings and goings of the people below with subtle distance. Looking down from above, Smith cast a poetic gaze on the human presence peopling the New York streets. [transitional sound]

The method used by contemporary Swiss photographer Lukas Hoffman, whose work is displayed later in this section, is very different to these shots taken from a distance. In the street, equipped with a heavy photographic chamber that he carries without using a tripod, the artist positions himself as close as possible to his anonymous subjects. His large-format prints bring us up close and personal with these bodies in movement. [transitional sound]
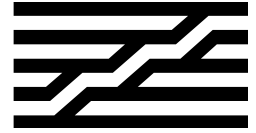
4 – Fragments

Head, hand, finger, eye, ear, leg, chest, foot, hair... cutting up the body by framing exerts a true power of attraction, for photographers and viewers alike. These images reveal the delicateness of certain movements, or the grace of particular gestures. But as objects of both fascination and fantasy, these photos also raise more political questions around the often uneven relationship of domination that they imply.

While certain postures are enhanced when photographed in this fragmented way, they are also of course a form of objectification, particularly of the female body. When the body is divided up in photos, there is always a form of violence, and it is by taking ownership of this rhetoric of fragmentation that many artists denounce the persistence of these relationships of domination. [transitional sound]

For example, American artist Tarrah Krajnak reinterprets classical works in the history of photography in her *Master Rituals* series. In the part titled *Weston's Nudes*, she performs a critical restaging of nudes by American photographer Edward Weston.

By replicating the poses of Bertha Wardell and Charis Wilson, the models photographed by Weston, Krajnak replaces the stereotypical ideal of white femininity with her Peruvian female body. Above all, Krajnak reveals how these emblematic examples of the female nude genre of photography are manufactured. In this series, the artist illustrates how women can take back power over portrayals of their bodies. [transitional sound]

The end of this section is dedicated to the famous death mask of the unknown of the Seine river, an object of fascination for many artists and writers since the end of the 19th century. According to popular legend, this mask is a cast of a young woman who was found drowned in the Paris river. A number of photographers, including Man Ray and Albert Rudomine, used this quasi-mythical figure to unveil the disturbing fascination that it generated.
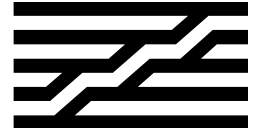
The obsession continued into the 1960s, when Man Ray took a series of photographs for a new edition of the novel Aurélien by Louis Aragon, an excerpt from which you can listen to in the exhibition. [transitional sound]

5 – Within oneself

Photographers sometimes give the impression of being outsiders to the scene that they are observing. By adopting a greater distance, they become witnesses to scenes of contemplation, melancholy, or solitude. From further back, they are able to capture individuals lost in their thoughts, or even in a state of deep meditation.

The images presented in the fifth section show a certain form of humility on the part of the photographers, aware as they are of the limitations of their practice. Faced with a subject withdrawn into themselves, they must settle for capturing the scene from the outside. There are multiple strategies for them to photograph these men and women, who may be aware of the camera or not.

Certain photographers reference their invisibility by using a pared-back style, for example, taking the photograph face-on or choosing neutral tones. Others reveal their absolute empathy towards the subject, opting for a dramatic use of framing and lighting. This search for just the right distance expresses a certain kind of poetry that is so specific to these contemplative silences. [transitional sound]

Valérie Jouve's work exhibited at the entrance to this section is an example of this. The portrait is untitled and we cannot know exactly where the subject is, other than that it may be an urban or peri-urban setting. Time and space therefore remain undefined, like the person represented: only their clothes and attitude give us a few clues. Printed on an almost life-size scale, this image reinforces the tension between the subject and the viewer, while emphasizing the distance that separates them. [transitional sound]
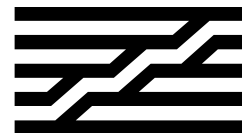
6 – Interiors

The sixth section of the exhibition looks at the photographer's position in relation to society, defined as a set of collective bodies. Why and how are these collective bodies represented? What portrait can be taken of an individual within them?

For photographers, the issue is to define their position in relation to their subject, in order to guarantee the authenticity of the photographic statement. Sometimes, the photographer themselves is a part of the group; in other instances, they are an outsider – in which case, they need to know how to contact them, how to share their life, and to decide what kind of portrait they wish to create. These collective bodies may represent spaces of social exclusion, or spaces of freedom, where underground social and political struggles sometimes operate. [transitional sound]

The photos by Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava, exhibited in the middle of this section, are striking examples of this. In the 1950s and 1960s, these two African American men were highly engaged witnesses to the marginalisation of Black populations in Harlem, New York. In daily contact with the subjects that they photographed, they embodied a certain way of being as photographers in society and demonstrated the duties of an artist in such a position.

Their images also show the many channels through which photos were distributed at the time. They appeared in mainstream magazines like Life, but also in artist books, showcasing the connection between text and image, like in The Sweet Flypaper of Life, created by Roy DeCarava and African American poet and writer Langston Hughes.

Protest books – very popular in the 1960s and 1970s – represented another and sometimes even more radical means of expression of the representation of social causes through photography. [transitional sound]
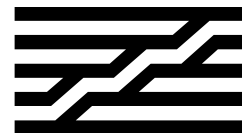
More recently, Spanish photographer Laia Abril created a vast project named *A History of Misogyny*, with the *On Abortion* chapter addressing the pushback against abortion rights around the world. Her installations, which combine portraits, objects and texts, allow her to shine a light on personal stories that would otherwise have been kept secret because of social stigma. The intimate narratives, to which the artist was granted access, are blended with more universal stories of oppression and violence. [transitional sound]


7 – Ghosts

We began the exhibition by a face-to-face between close-up shots, perfectly modelled by light, shade and framing, bringing out particular identities. We end the exhibition with a presentation of ghost-like figures: undefined, disintegrated individuals. The artists used different processes to capture images of these evanescent bodies: graphic compositions with shadow and blur, use of archival images and subversion of photography techniques. While they often bear witness to violence towards the body, these photos can also sometimes come along its rebirth. [transitional sound]

For her *Déserteurs* installation, Stéphanie Solinas walked around the 70,000 graves at the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, and started to document the remains of photograph portraits decorating the graves. The artist thus photographed the slow disappearance of 379 images of deceased individuals, then, on the surface of her prints, engraved the geographic coordinates of each tombstone in braille.
She thereby gave a very real presence – an exact location – to the erased faces.
This ritual act is tinted with melancholy, and is also, I quote the artist: "a call to bring back the identities that are fading away", in the words of the artist. [transitional sound]

At the end of the exhibition, Trevor Paglen's work titled *Fanon (Even the Dead Are Not Safe)* embodies this tension between death and rebirth in yet another way. This photograph was produced using artificial intelligence and stands as the final portrait of Frantz Fanon, the famous anti-colonialist figure, who passed away in 1961.
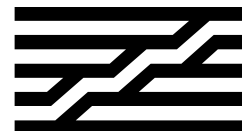
This face is actually a combination of multiple images of the face of Fanon found online and processed by facial recognition software. [transitional sound]

This portrait enters into dialogue with a polyptych work from Michael Ackerman. He rose to prominence in 1999 with his series taken in Varanasi, a sacred city in India, where life and death coexist in great intensity. His black-and-white images depict a hallucinatory vision of this place, peopled by ghost-like presences. This polyptych was produced during a more recent journey to the city, where Ackerman focused mainly on the presence of animals. The photos are decomposed and damaged to reflect lived experience, which is by nature incomplete. Through this assemblage of images, the artist conveys the complexity of sight and of the memory of a place. [transitional sound]

[jingle of the show] It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou website, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast!

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