

AGENDA — 1 JUNE 2021

A new exhibition asks, how did humanity get here? And how might it progress?

by **ELLIE HOWARD**



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10 Photos



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The Horizon is Moving Nearer, at Bienal Fotografia do Porto, brings together series from several



photographers. Collectively, their work commentates on the critical issues shaping contemporary life and considers how we may resolve them

The Horizon is Moving Nearer, exhibiting as part of *Bienal'21 Fotografia do Porto*, seeks to find answers to how we arrived at our current predicament while forming questions about progressing out of it. Vast and interconnected issues from the climate crisis to systemic racism exacerbated and further exposed by a global pandemic can no longer be withstood or denied. At a time of collective anxiety over an unclear future, the exhibition considers what images and realities are to come?

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa's *One Wall a Web* (2018) occupies one cell in the space. Archival imagery, text, and contemporary visuals rub against each other to generate emotive resonances. They resist definition but are disquietingly familiar nonetheless, provoking one to speculate on why. The photographs are documents of America: a blown-up poster of a bodybuilder from sometime in the 1950s-60s, in which the individual seemingly 'salutes' in a Javelin position on stage, hangs before a monochrome postcard-sized snap showing quiet televisions alongside a 'VOTE' sign from a later era. Opposite, there is a stark image depicting a penitentiary today.

This specific curation is only one of the many interrelations found throughout the display and it provokes questions around perceived differences between power and violence. The project avoids reproducing dominant visual strategies — such as spectacle — to explore configurations of structural inequality in America. Instead, it reveals what is often rendered invisible: 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy' to borrow Bell Hooks oft-cited phrase, which she has employed to describe the interlocking political systems at play. Further, by incorporating imagery placed along a time continuum, the curation reveals this visual legacy's history just at the point it attempts to re-articulate itself within the present.



One Wall a Web (2018) Courtesy the artist © Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa.





One Wall a Web (2018) Courtesy the artist © Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa.

Housed within the Portuguese Centre of Photography (Centro Português de Fotografia), which occupies the Cadeia de Relação, a labyrinthine 18th-century prison-turned-photography-museum, the exhibition takes place across cells that held prisoners of Estado Novo until the 1970s. The Portuguese dictatorship wielded a powerful visual legacy that promoted a Salazarist vision, and the oppressive space serves as a reminder that photography has always been vulnerable to dominant forces. As such, the featured photographers (also including Lisa Barnard, Poulomi Basu, Nancy Burson, Maxime Matthys, Gideon Mendel, Simon Roberts and Salvatore Vitale) work outside of traditional documentary photography practice. "They all think critically and self-reflexively, not just about the world but the world of images," writes curator Tim Clark, who is also a writer and the editor in chief and director of *1000 Words*. "Many of them, in this particular group, inspire me as a curator given that they deal with that delicious paradox of attempting to approach a given reality with a documentary attitude, while it frequently shape-shifts and shimmers or is too vast and complex to merit a singular approach."

In a second cell, the Indian artist and activist Poulomi Basu's multi-layered series *Centralia* (2010-20) explores an ongoing conflict between India and the Maoist People's Liberation Guerrilla Army over mineral resources and indigenous groups' land rights. Like Wolukau-Wanambwa, Basu resists simplification and invites a more nuanced reading by refusing to give us the whole picture. Instead, fragmented photographs, documents and text leave gaps forcing the viewer to look harder and think longer. And when a conventional conflict portrait of violence appears, Basu troubles our consumption of it. Strung between two pillars hangs a photograph of two corpses, which are only partially visible through a thick cinematic red seepage. By sitting at the intersection of reality and a heightened emotional state, the work helps viewers consider how we process visual cues in an age of post-truth geopolitics.



Centralia (2010-20) Courtesy the artist © Poulomi Basu.



Centralia (2010-20) Courtesy the artist © Paulomi Basu.

Post-truth becoming part of our vernacular is unsurprisingly linked to Trump and the rise of the alt-right, political strongmen and Brexit. All of whom figure throughout the exhibition in various forms. Nancy Burson's *Trump as Five Different Races* (2016) imagines the previous president as of other ethnicities, denying him the whiteness on which he divined himself. She considers an alternative Trump, one who could express emotional empathy for people despite perceived differences, instead of employing xenophobia as fuel. In appealing to a state of mass panic, Trump generated false threats while obscuring real ones. Gideon Mendel's *Deluge* (2018) sits in direct dialogue – five screens show devastating flood footage from the UK to Houston and India, a stark reminder of the environmental issues we face.

If the projects presented throughout make visible the abstract socio, economic and political factors at play, the exhibition's last leg explores displays of state surveillance. In Salvatore Vitale's project *How to Secure a Country*, the photographer interrogates the private world of security. Switzerland touts itself as the safest country in the world, but the work problematises this. It investigates and exposes the social and technological mechanisms that underlie the country's national security and how these mechanisms become normalised.



Trump as Five Different Races (2016) Courtesy the artist © Nancy Burson.

Elsewhere, Maxime Matthys re-creates Chinese state surveillance algorithms as rendered by biometric facial recognition software. *2091: The Ministry Of Privacy* (2019) is an Orwellian reference to the 6.7 million trackers that monitor the Xinjiang province, where it is estimated the government have detained 1.1 million Muslim Uyghurs. Matthys' photographs simultaneously anonymise those in the images while revealing their vulnerability through data visualisations. While he is careful not to compare Western data collection to a state-sanctioned cultural and ethnic genocide, the future of surveillance technology is still uncharted territory.

The Horizon is Moving Nearer does not assume a resolution, nor should it need to. Instead, it acts as “a story, of stories, that seeks to articulate links across the roots of interconnected forms of oppression,” Clark explains. But, more so, it explores the broader systemic issues occurring within our image ecology and how photography is disseminated and consumed. Tasked with a monumental challenge, falling back on our old patterns and conventions is not an option. To progress requires experimentation. As Susie Linfield discusses in *Cruel Radiance* (2010): “Like human rights themselves, this expansive kind of vision is not particularly natural but, rather, is something we must consciously create.”



2091: The Ministry of Privacy (2019) Courtesy the artist © Maxime Matthys.



2091: The Ministry of Privacy (2019) Courtesy the artist © Maxime Matthys.



How to Secure a Country (2014-19) Courtesy the artist © Salvatore Vitale.



How to Secure a Country (2014-19) Courtesy the artist © Salvatore Vitale.

The Horizon is Moving Nearer is on show at Bienal'21 Fotografia do Porto until 20 June 2021.

TAGS: 1000 WORDS, BIENAL FOTOGRAFIA DO PORTO, EXHIBITION, TIM CLARK



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