

**The suggestion of an echo traced by the touch of a capturing device**  
**by Ricardo Reverón Blanco**

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt,  
seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it.

Susan Sontag<sup>1</sup>

Evidence of the exile experience is often, to use Sontag's terms, unfurnished. These narratives map and recount the stories of migration, yet they frequently fall short of fully conveying the harrowing conditions endured. The strategies to share these personal accounts are varied, protracted, and intricate. At this year's Venice Biennale, Bouchra Khalili's "The Constellation Series" a part of *The Mapping Journey Project* presented eight-channel videos focusing solely on a map, as a hand wielding a permanent marker traced in real-time the often years-long, tortuous, and perilous journeys of individuals excluded from citizenship. For millennia, displacement and the journeys undertaken under such dire circumstances have been recounted by countless hands, yet these stories often transform into distant recollections, whose detailed accounts remain an unrepresentable experience.

The projects 'into the frameless distance' and 'city of (no) memory' by artist Patti Gaal-Holmes, including photographic series, photobooks and 16mm looper projection films, focuses on her father's escape from Hungary and the artist's search for traces in the cities and landscapes of his past, that being Budapest and the Bratislava/Austria border. Its aim is simple: to encounter a memory and anchoring its contents photographically, yet the results are complex as these memories flee in a perpetual back and forth. The search for a 'lost' father has been wrestled with since the Bible, and one can associate the literary and conceptual links made by the likes of Albert Camus, Paul Auster and Keggie Carew to the contemporary artist, John Akomfrah in *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a dialogue with his intellectual, rather than biological father, Stuart Hall.<sup>2</sup>

This methodology and practical iterations of methods to capture (photography, film, research, evidence gathering) become a language which Gaal-Holmes uses to fit within this discourse. From the conception of the first daguerreotype, the history of photography has been obsessed with the act of capture. In Gaal-Holmes' work, we see the inefficacy of recounting the experience of exile and through an obsessive collection of captures, often of the same location, and its slow erasure through its chemical revelation processes.

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<sup>1</sup> In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. Starting with their use by the Paris police in the murderous roundup of Communards in June 1871, photographs became a useful tool of modern states in the surveillance and control of their increasingly mobile populations.

<sup>2</sup> One can see further references in; Albert Camus, *The First Man* (1994), Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) and Keggie Carew *Dadland: A Journey into Unchartered Territory* (2017).

Since its emergence, the photographic process has been inextricably linked to ideas of death and mourning. With the ability to (re)produce moments in the past into tangible objects, photography becomes a medium that affects human's ability to recollect. In 'city of (no) memory' and 'into the frameless distance' places and past events are captured as if they were apparitions of the past in Hungary and Bratislava, haunting its borders and being exhumed in the darkroom in order to be materially traced back to celluloid or paper. These processes are more generally informed by experimental photography and film, as well as 'anti-photography' works here reminiscent of the Japanese photographers Daido Moriyama and Takuma Nakahira. To recall the past is to look at something that has died: photographs are always depictions of a scene that had ceased to exist. Whether the image shows an immortalised object or a subject that remains alive, the scene in which the photograph was taken quickly perishes with the click of the camera. Roland Barthes, alongside other photography theorists, have pinpointed the inextricable connection between photography and death.<sup>3</sup> Moriyama and Nakahira's 'anti-photography' projects defied conventional photography rules by extending the frame, shooting into light, and working 'carelessly' to delve beneath the surface of an image. They aimed to uncover the deeper truths beyond the concrete reality that typical photography manuals might instruct against. Moriyama sought to reveal the 'scars left after the membrane of fake reality is removed,' exposing the essence of existence. His seminal work *Farewell Photography* (1972) features motifs like breaking the film frame and creating ghost images or completely white negatives, emphasising the non-existence of the copula and exposing reality to light. Similarly, Nakahira believed facing the real world meant facing the light, striving not only to photograph subjects bathed in light but to capture light itself.<sup>4</sup>

During its development in France, Niepce and Daguerre discovered a way to immortalise images of the camera obscura in 1839.<sup>5</sup> As a mystery to many, William Henry Fox Talbot allegedly developed his own *calotype* two years after Daguerre's discovery: a photographic process using sensitised paper with silver chloride which was proportionally exposed in light. Another mystery was the science behind these photographic methods, which seemed to many contemporaries a series of obscure magical practices. These attitudes were consolidated by the mystical representations of such processes, where the chemicals used to reveal images are depicted as ethereal mists of residue that are left in the plate at the end of what Niepce would call, the *heliographic process*.<sup>6</sup> Revealing a photograph becomes an act of dialogue and a sudden spiritual touch reveals the echoes of something that has once been lost and is almost brought back to life.

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Shimizu, M. (2012). 'Grainy, Blurry, Out-of-Focus: Daido Moriyama's Farewell Photography' in Baker, S, p. 57

<sup>5</sup> Helmut Gernsheim, *Concise History of Photography*, 3rd ed. (New York: Dover, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Nicéphore Niepce, 'Memoire on the Heliograph' [Paris, 1833] in *Classic Essays on Photography* ed. by Alan Trachtenburg (1980), pp. 5–10.

Seeking the elusive traces of Gaal-Holmes' father becomes an act of self-awareness about the transitory nature of migration and one's loss of identity by losing the meaning of 'home'. The artist's research is thorough, referring to Sandor Marai's *Memoir of Hungary 1944-48* (1996) as he fled in the same year as her father, providing a poignant context for understanding the resolve to leave as post-war Hungary's conditions rendered life unbearable for many. Marai's account brings to life the desolation and despair that permeated the post-war country, painting a haunting image of a nation in turmoil. These reflections offer a window into a collective memory of those who chose to flee, driven by political oppression, economic hardship, environmental devastation, and cultural disintegration.

The artist's research delves into how exile shapes her family's identity, including her father's enforced exile from Hungary and the self-imposed exiles of her mother from Germany and the artist's from South Africa. The project, in various stages of production, encompasses a range of themes. One centres on South Africa, specifically the *Liliesleaf Farm Mayibuye* (2016) film project, which engages with apartheid and familial histories. Another focuses on her father's escape, crossing into Belgium from Hungary, and his status as a refugee. It also explores the fifteen years he spent in the Belgian Congo. Each project incorporates film and photography as an anthropological capturing device that retells the story through finding clues to how these experiences shape individuals whilst navigating their journeys. Ultimately, these journeys become an impossible search: a perpetual *dislocation*.<sup>7</sup> At a time when international geopolitical discussions are a starting point for conflict, Gaal-Holmes' work is a foundational reconnaissance around the importance of land, heritage and one's cultural identity.

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<sup>7</sup> *Dislocations* at Palais de Tokyo brought together fifteen artists from different generations and backgrounds whose work is marked or informed by the experience of exile, of being torn between here and there.