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The Afterlives of Vernacular Photographs

**Author: Ngan Wa Ao
Doctoral School
The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław**

**Supervisor: dr hab. Przemysław Pintał, Profesor ASP
Faculty of Painting and Drawing
The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław**

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Abstract

This research combines artistic practice with theoretical analysis and uses destruction as an artistic methodology to rethink the concept of vernacular photography. Rather than the conventional approach of case studies focusing on the historical or aesthetic value of specific kinds of vernacular photographs, this research views vernacular photography as a constantly evolving medium. Within this framework, it analyses and explores the various afterlives of vernacular photographs.

This research uses destruction as an artistic methodology that reveals deeper meanings beyond the visually apparent, transforming vernacular photographs from static objects into dynamic entities. The final artistic results will take the form of installation and objects. This research also reflects on how everyday photographs evolve through emerging technologies, such as AI and mixed reality, to redefine vernacular photography as a participatory medium and an active agent that shapes our perception of the world.

Introduction

We live in a world saturated with photographs, with new images filling our daily lives every second. How has this nearly 200-year-old technology impacted our lives, and how will it continue to shape our future? Globally, we capture 5.3 billion photos daily, equivalent to 61,400 photos every second, and share 14 billion images on social media every day.¹

I often wonder about the fate of these everyday photographs. Are they endlessly circulating on the internet, never finding a permanent home? Are most destined to remain trapped on devices, never printed, or perhaps deleted without a trace? This made me wonder about the afterlives of our photographs. While I was daydreaming the answer, a black-and-white photo from the 1940s, which I had bought at a flea market years ago and now hangs on my kitchen wall, seemed to stare right back at me.

As an international student in Poland, I discovered second-hand and flea markets where I could easily purchase old photographs from decades ago at very low prices. This always made me wonder where these photographs come from and where they are heading. Unlike the modern digital images that surround us today, which are so intertwined with everyday life that it's hard to step back and see where they're heading, these old analog photographs seem to have already begun their own afterlives, touched by countless hands, regenerating history and meaning. Once purchased and displayed in my home, they transformed into both historical artifacts and personal possessions. They carry specific historical contexts and personal significance, now viewed and owned by someone (a stranger) from decades later.

This raises questions about the significance of vernacular photographs over time. In the past, they were intimate tokens of personal memories; today, they have become objects of historical curiosity and nostalgia. But are they more than that? What meanings will they hold in the future? As the original owners and intended viewers are absent, what afterlives do these photographs now possess?

Do these nameless, old photographs become fragments of a larger visual data system in our collective lives? Do they still carry significance and influence our world and minds, shaping who we are and what we do?

¹ Broz, Matic. "How Many Photos Are Taken Every Day?" *Photutorial*, 12 Sept. 2024, <https://photutorial.com/photos-statistics/>.

In his 2000 essay *Vernacular Photographies*, Geoffrey Batchen wrote:

How can photography be restored to its own history? And how can we ensure this history will be both materially grounded and conceptually expansive, just like the medium itself? Well, perhaps we should start by considering what has always been excluded from photography's history: ordinary photographs, the ones made or bought (or sometimes bought and then made over) by everyday folk from 1839 until now, the photographs that preoccupy the home and the heart but rarely the museum or the academy.²

Since Batchen's essay, there has been increasing interest in vernacular photography. A good example is the symposium *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, held at the Lenfest Center for the Arts at Columbia University in 2018.³ It brought together scholars such as Geoffrey Batchen, Clément Chéroux, Ariella Azoulay, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Tina Campt, and many other professionals and theorists in the photography field. However, after two days of intense conversations and debates, one big question remained unanswered:

What is vernacular photography, really?

This uncertainty supports Batchen's idea in 2000: there hasn't been enough discussion about vernacular photographs. And more than 20 years later, we're still trying to figure out what they mean and, more importantly, what they do to us.

Even so, the lack of a clear definition hasn't stopped artists from working with these intriguing images. Artists like Christian Boltanski, Thomas Mailaender, Erik Kessels, Joachim Schmid, and many others have used vernacular photographs to explore themes such as memory, identity, culture, and history.

There is a common approach in artistic practices involving vernacular photographs; the visual value is often considered the center of everything. Who is depicted (are they important)? Is it visually interesting (for contemporary viewers)? Is it sentimental (nostalgic)? Political (historical)? or aesthetically pleasing (surprisingly artistic)?

I wonder, can we go beyond the visual surface to discuss these photographs? Is it possible to step away from what the image represents and view vernacular photography as a medium in itself, as a

² Batchen, Geoffrey. *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*. MIT Press, 2002. p. 57.

³ Center for the Study of Social Difference CSSD. *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography - Panel One Presentations*. Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=My3UWYu_D3k&ab_channel=CenterfortheStudyofSocialDifferenceCSSD. Accessed 8 Dec. 2024.

whole, not just some selectively valuable photos? Can vernacular photography be meaningful as a medium without an “ interesting ” image? Can we discuss the medium even without an image at all? John Cage argued that any sound can be music, depending on the context and the listener's perception. Can we think of photography in a similar way? Can we recognize that vernacular photography is not just about the images but also how they reflect and shape who we are? After all, we are vernacular, and vernacular is us.

As a collector myself, I sometimes come across photographs that are damaged by time, whether by temperature, dust, human touch, or other factors. It shows that physical photographs are not long-lasting material; they are almost "self-destructive" and slowly decay over time. Destruction, or self-destruction, seems to be inherently tied to photography. Whether it's the physical condition of photographs or the impact of technological advancements, photography is constantly in a process of decay. Just as photography is often described as a documentation of fleeting moments, in a way, it captures the passage of time and reminds us of our mortality.

Does this medium also reveal its own continuous afterlives? As I mentioned earlier, photographs are constantly being born. Does this also mean that many are continually "dying"? If so, how does this cycle of life operate? And if not, what is the significance of all these living photographs in our world?

The first part of the dissertation will unpack and analyze vernacular photography's definitions and specific characteristics, exploring its afterlives through theoretical and conceptual perspectives. The second part will focus on artistic practices that employ destruction as a methodology, including transforming photographs and objects, ultimately leading to the final artworks - *De-framed* and *New Ways of Old Seeing*. Throughout, the dissertation will also reflect on my research and creative journey, examining the shifts in direction and evolving focus that shaped the development of the research.

Artistic Methodology

This research adopts destruction as an artistic methodology to explore vernacular photography as a medium. It applies the ideas of dismantling established structures and disrupting conventional understandings and hierarchies to the context of vernacular photography.

The process involves physically altering photographs, removing, burning, scratching, and embedding them in materials like wax. These deliberate acts of deconstruction challenge the traditional prioritization of certain images based on specific values. Instead, the practice redefines vernacular photography as a fluid and participatory medium, capable of continuous transformation and reinterpretation.

Part of my artistic practice involves destroying my personal archive, which questions the permanence and individuality of personal images. This act shifts the focus from their specific, individual content to their broader role as vernacular photography, an evolving and dynamic medium.



Chapter I

Identity Crisis

Are photographs expected to do too much? As we strive in our expectations for photographs to be truthful, to be factual, to be truth-tellers, evidentiary records, documentary makers, memory containers, windows to the world, or artistic objects, questions arise as to what photography is, what it does and more importantly, what is it that photographs fail to do? While photography has seemingly always suffered from an identity crisis.⁴

It is always challenging to understand or define photography. As soon as one concept is grasped, technology and perception change, making any understanding temporary or incomplete. Throughout the 19th century, photography was often described using metaphors like sun picture, painting with light, mirror, memory, shadow, and vision. By the mid-20th century, it was viewed as an index or trace of objects.⁵ We always need new metaphors to help us understand photography, a constantly evolving medium.

But what about vernacular photographs? How do we identify them?

The etymology of "vernacular" traces back to the Latin root "verna," meaning an enslaved person. In ancient Roman law, "vernaculars" specifically referred to enslaved people who were not acquired through trade, neither purchased nor exchanged, but were instead born in the home of their owner. By extension, the vernacular relates to anything made, cultivated, or brought up in the house; it is tied to domestic or homemade production and is consequently often associated with local and regional outputs.⁶ This notion of servitude seems to parallel the fate of vernacular photographs: they exist in a state of namelessness and homelessness, subject to adoption, relocation, ownership, and even manipulation by their possessor.

⁴ Brett, Donna West, and Natalya Lusty. "Photography and Ontology: Unsettling Images." *Photography and Ontology, An Introduction*, edited by Donna West Brett and Natalya Lusty, Routledge, 2022. p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁶ Chéroux, Clément. "Introducing Werner Kähler." *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, edited by Tina Campt et al., Steidl Verlag, 2020, p. 22.

In a similar metaphor, vernacular photographs, sometimes called orphan photographs, are described as unprotected, displaced images that circulate from owner to owner until someone assigns them value.⁷ Artist and scholar Tina Campt defines orphan photographs as those no longer connected to the people depicted or to their families, who could speak to the circumstances in which the photographs were taken.⁸

The metaphor of orphans, or the etymological connection to enslaved people born within the household, positions vernacular photographs as passive objects waiting to be adopted, seen, valued, and given a second life. It seems that vernacular photographs are always awaiting the mercy of others, such as artists or photographers, to be "rescued." I wonder if there is a certain hierarchy at play here. Would it help us to understand vernacular photography better, or would it limit our understanding?

Ordinary's every day

Ordinary or mundane, such as family snapshots, holiday photographs, animal, and child, but as well many others that seem less ordinary, but somehow it is everyday vernacular photographs, postmortem photographs, medical images, car accident photographs, photographs produced by scientists, Polices, military, insurance agencies, underground community, photo booths, fashion and wedding photographs, ID pictures, and many other, vernacular photography, and the vernacular at large, consist of that which is utilitarian, domestic, and popular.⁹ — Clément Chéroux

The term "ordinary" is often used to describe vernacular photographs. However, what does this term signify within a political context? Any notion of the ordinary is temporary in human history; practices such as the slave trade or brutal colonization, while once in history considered "ordinary," do not align with today's idea of the ordinary anymore.

⁷ Gross, Eduard-Claudiu. "The Significance of Orphan Photography: Rethinking Vernacular Photography in the Context of Art History." *EON*, vol. 4, 2023, p. 129.

⁸ Campt, Tina M. *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Duke University Press, 2012, p. 87.

⁹ Chéroux, op. cit., p. 24

An essential aspect of vernacular photographs is that they document different eras of the so-called ordinary, though what they capture often ceases to be ordinary over time. Rather than calling them "ordinary photographs," the term "everyday photographs" might be more fitting. This term reflects our everyday experiences and how we imagine others' everyday lives, sometimes far from ordinary to different viewers. Recognizing this characteristic of temporary status in each photograph reveals that these images are never fixed within any category; instead, they undergo a continuous transformation of identity and meaning across time.

Afterlives — From Category to Process

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) defines vernacular photography as:

An umbrella term used to distinguish fine art photographs from those made for a huge range of purposes, including commercial, scientific, forensic, governmental, and personal. Snapshots capturing everyday life and subjects are a major form of vernacular photography.

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This definition treats vernacular photography as a fixed category, distinct from fine art photography. My concern with this definition, particularly coming from such a significant art institution, is that it oversimplifies vernacular photographs. It frames them as being defined only by their lack of artistic intention rather than considering their broader significance in the everyday visual landscape. This approach seems to reduce vernacular photography to a label that merely contrasts with artistic photography, reinforcing the superiority of the latter.

No photograph was born vernacular; It is only when these photographs lose what defines them as vernacular that they become vernacular. It is only when such photographs are served from their first life(lives) that they can enter their second life(lives) as vernacular photographs.¹¹ — Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

In this research, the concept of vernacular photographs aligns with scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett's argument that no photograph is born vernacular. In their first life, whether as headshots, mug shots, real estate images, crime scene photos, or family and travel snapshots, these photographs serve specific, everyday functions. They represent a variety of values: utilitarian, commercial, sentimental, forensic, commemorative, mnemonic, erotic, or even unsettling.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that photographs only become vernacular when they lose the characteristics that originally defined them. This transformation occurs as they move beyond their first life(lives) and enter a second life(lives) as vernacular photographs.

¹⁰ "Vernacular Photography." *Moma.org*, <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/vernacular-photography>. Accessed 6 Nov. 2024.

¹¹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. "The Extraordinary Ordinary: Reflections on Vernacular Photography." *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, edited by Tina Campt et al., Steidl Verlag, 2020, p. 304.

As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, "It must die as a memento or mug shot to be reborn as vernacular." This transition involves the photograph shedding its original role as a functional or sentimental object and taking on new layers of meaning. No photograph starts as "ordinary" or as something opposed to art; rather, these identities are constructed through cultural processes that reassign their value.¹²

The idea that the photograph has a life of its own poses questions about our own histories and desires as viewers, alongside the trace of the photographer's presence in a particular time and space.¹³

¹² Ibid., p. 305

¹³ Brett and Lusty, op. cit., p. 22.

Afterlives — From Ordinary to Extraordinary

Artists or historians persevere and play with archives politically by highlighting specific social issues or marginalized communities. These vernacular artists and archivists distill meaning from their reorganized detritus through the conceptual processes of taxonomic classification, serial repetition, progressive sequences, or the sheer accumulation of new archives. These artists use the emotional appeal of everyday objects not nostalgically but strategically as a way to provide a bulwark against trauma and loss, and all that is ephemeral.¹⁴ — Bill Merchant

Artists have long engaged with vernacular photographs to explore themes of memory, identity, humor, and the passage of time. Artists like Christian Boltanski famously used vernacular photographs to explore profound themes of memory, identity, and anonymity. His monument's installations evoke emotional responses and invite viewers to reflect on the passage of time and how personal histories are preserved or lost. In contrast, French artist Thomas Mailaender uses humor in his practice; in his book *The Fun Archaeology*, published in 2018, he humorously examines vernacular photographic objects and creates a personal visual archaeology of the 20th century.¹⁵ Dutch artist Erik Kessels, in his photo book series *In Almost Every Picture*, categorizes vernacular photographs by context, pose, and specific style to explore human photographic habits.¹⁶ Joachim Schmid works with physical vernacular photographs through collage, rearrangement, and various display methods, highlighting the ambiguity of visual context. Japanese artist Kensuke Koike cut up old photographs to create humoristic surrealistic collages; photographs are torn into parts of different visual elements, and handmade animation creates a new visual aesthetic.¹⁷

¹⁴ Merchant, Bill. *Brian Wallis Why Vernacular Photography*. Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TmsVx8M9o4>. Accessed 8 Nov. 2024.

¹⁵ “Ensemble – Thomas Mailaender – THE FUN ARCHEOLOGY.” *Ensemble.Biz*, <https://ensemble.biz/products/thomas-mailaender-the-fun-archeology>. Accessed 8 Nov. 2024.

¹⁶ “In Almost Every Picture —.” *ERIK KESSELS*, <https://www.erikkessels.com/in-almost-every-picture>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2024.

¹⁷ Cordroc’h, Solenn. “Kensuke Koike, alchemist of distorted photographs.” *Pen Magazine International*, 30 May 2019, <https://pen-online.com/arts/kensuke-koike-deconstructs-photos-to-reconstruct/>.

Joachim Schmid described himself during the late 1980s to mid-1990s as a professional looker; he could look at about 10.000 photographs in a day and find the photographs that visually inspired him.¹⁸

Artists working with vernacular photographs often begin as collectors, gathering images that intrigue them for their perceived value, whether aesthetic, historical, or cultural. However, this idea of seeking "valuable" elements raises questions for me: Does this imply that vernacular photographs lacking such qualities will go unnoticed? Must they only be viewed under certain conditions to be deemed important?

At the very beginning of my research year, I was invited to work with the VEHA archive, a self-organized initiative dedicated to preserving vernacular archival photography as a cultural heritage and a key element of the invisible history of Belarus. The VEHA platform acts as a horizontal memory institute, uniting various social communities in this endeavor.¹⁹

The archive consists of vernacular photographs from Belarus, documenting unique cultural aspects such as marriage, funerals, and people's relationship with nature. Originally as family albums, these photographs have taken on new significance following the Belarusian protests in 2020 and the increasing influence of Russia. The Belarusian people now use these photographs to preserve and promote their culture and history for younger generations. Through collaboration with artists, these archives have transformed into art objects, shifting from their original roles as family mementos to becoming part of an activism movement. They now serve as evidence of everyday Belarusian life, promoting Belarusian history, resisting propaganda, and countering Russian imperial influence.

¹⁸ Schmid, Joachim. *Photoworks 1982-2007*. Steidl Verlag, 2007, p. 12.

¹⁹ *Veha-archive.org*, <https://veha-archive.org/info>. Accessed 8 Dec. 2024.

Touching Palms, 2023

object: gypsum, 297 x 420 cm, 30 pieces



Exhibition View: *Let It Shine*. MOS. Municipal Art Center Gorzów Wielkopolski, Poland, 2023

My work *Touching Palms* presents fragments of photographs printed on concrete, sourced from two VEHA collections: *The Girls' Night* (wedding photographs) and *The Last Photo* (funeral photographs). While searching for the “extraordinary” in the “ordinary” and viewing more than 1,000 photographs, I noticed that in the wedding images, couples often hold hands, symbolizing intimacy, connection, and partnership. Similarly, in the funeral album, the deceased are consistently portrayed with their hands clasped together and resting on their stomachs. This gesture reflects a comparable form of intimacy, suggesting the closeness of one’s soul. It ensures that the deceased are not alone and that they rest peacefully, holding themselves in preparation for whatever may come in the afterlife.

The birth of the VEHA archive comes from the contemporary Belarusian political climate. It has become a tool of solidarity, as the archive was built through an open call, with people voluntarily contributing family photographs or private collections to be part of it. For these individuals, using photographs to preserve their identity is urgent and crucial. The act of holding hands also symbolizes such solidarity.

This collaboration with the VEHA archive is an example of the afterlives of vernacular photographs through artistic engagement. Once ordinary family snapshots, these images have transformed into extraordinary photographs that challenge propaganda and resist the erasure of cultural histories.

However, this experience led me to reflect on the focus of my research: should it center on case studies of particular groups of vernacular photographs, or should it explore vernacular photography as a medium in its own right?

In considering this question, I observed a tendency within vernacular photography practices to prioritize images based on their perceived historical or cultural significance. While this approach underscores the importance of these photographs and their ability to address significant issues, my research seeks to take a broader direction. Rather than emphasizing individual examples or narratives, I aim to view vernacular photography as a medium—one that is fluid, participatory, and capable of continuously reshaping our understanding of the visual landscape.

Regardless of their original context, all vernacular photographs hold the great potential to serve as evidence of cultural memory, shaping how we see ourselves and understand our shared past.

There are no banal photographs, only banal ways of looking at them.²⁰

— Geoffrey Batchen

²⁰ Geoffrey Batchen on Vernacular Photography and Appreciating the Banal. *The Photo Vault: A Journey into Vernacular Photography, Archives and Photobooks*. Spotify, 7 Nov. 2023, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/62R5ixAaHNjOZBzJSGJnVK>.

Afterlives — From Identified to Anonymous

When a photograph becomes vernacular, its subjects often shift from identified individuals to anonymous figures. But how does anonymity function in vernacular photographs? How does it allow a specific personal image to invite everyone's gaze, fostering connections through its anonymity? The anonymous nature of vernacular photographs opens up endless possibilities for interpretation, which in turn become the images' afterlives.

Inscrutable pictures prolong this process of research and rediscovery; they make the challenges of knowledge visible. That is to say, they make the challenge of life visible. We cannot know what is next. We spend our whole lives trying to answer the question: why? We try to ride the breaking crest of knowledge, only to crash into the silvery surf over and over again. It's the questions that keep me afloat. ²¹

Think about the "E" at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. This mysterious inscription has puzzled historians and scholars for centuries. The exact significance of the letter "E" remains unclear, but it has been interpreted in various ways, including representing the number five, the Greek word for "if," or as a reference to the Delphic maxim "Know Thyself." ²²

While the mystery of the "E" at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi may hold great significance in history and anthropology, vernacular photographs also carry substantial historical and anthropological value, even if we have not yet fully recognized it. What vernacular photographs share with the "E" is a sense of anonymity that invites us to uncover knowledge from our past. Just as the "E" at Delphi prompts endless speculation and interpretation, vernacular photographs encourage us to piece together fragments of ordinary lives to understand how life once was and gain deeper insight into our world today.

Anonymous objects in inscrutable photographs undermine all I think I know about photography, that the medium represents the world in absolute and unflinching detail — by suggesting that I may not be able to identify everything. Still, they always allow me to try. They promise: there is yet more to know. ²³

²¹ Beil, Kim. *Anonymous Objects: Inscrutable Photographs and the Unknown*. Mack, 2023, p. 166.

²² Bates, William Nickerson. "The E of the Temple at Delphi." *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1925, pp. 239–246, doi:10.2307/497556.

²³ Beil, op. cit., p. 166

Anonymity itself also seems like a form of deconstruction of knowledge, challenging what we are able to know. We live in a world that constantly seeks definitions and answers for almost everything, so anonymous photographs might initially feel frustrating. However, they also offer both the photograph and the viewer a unique power: the ability to co-create a new truth.

Afterlives — From Understand to Interpretation

American vernacular photographs collector and curator, Vanessa Daou, noted that vernacular photographs lack a standardized way of understanding or a formal method of interpretation, offering no single guiding principle. However, this absence of structure invites a certain freedom of thought, allowing our minds to wander and explore new perspectives. Because there's no predefined frame of reference, our imagination is unleashed, prompting us to question the familiar ways in which we perceive the world.

Daou suggests that any conclusion we reach when viewing vernacular photographs only leads to further questions, creating a continuous cycle of inquiry that never truly ends. The only real takeaway is that there is no definitive understanding—only interpretation. To engage with these photographs, we must approach them with a fresh perspective, open to a wide range of emotions and thoughts. She also points out that while our observation of these photographs influences how we understand them, the opposite is also true: what we assume is happening in the images may not align with the reality of the moment. These photographs might depict events that unfolded differently than we imagine or even represent something entirely unexpected.²⁴

Throughout my research and artistic practice, I have engaged with vernacular photography in different roles: as a collector, buyer, viewer, observer, and artist. Each role involved different forms of engagement. As a collector and buyer, I sought out interesting pieces but often purchased them based on price or a first glance. I didn't truly "see" them until I scanned and examined each one individually.

At first, I always tried to “understand” them: When was the photograph taken? What technique was used? Where was it depicted? What was the photographer's intention? What was the relationship between the subject and the photographer? What was the occasion behind the image? But in the end, I realized I would never have a correct answer, as I was interpreting them through my own experiences, cultural background, knowledge, and the way I've been trained to see images as a photographer and artist.

²⁴ VANESSA DAOU — THE VERNACULAR EFFECT : Anonymous Snapshots and the Unlearning of Everything. Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDeTcHD-Vyg>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2024.

I exhaustively searched for the correct way to understand these images, but perhaps their existence isn't meant for understanding in a definitive way. Instead, they are there to be interpreted, to be looked at, and for me, as a viewer, to make sense of the world around me through them.

I decided to let my thoughts flow freely, accepting that there was no so-called "right" answer. I allowed the photographs to speak to me for what they were without imposing any disciplinary framework on them. Shifting from the concept of understanding to interpretation, the photographs began to transform into my own memories.

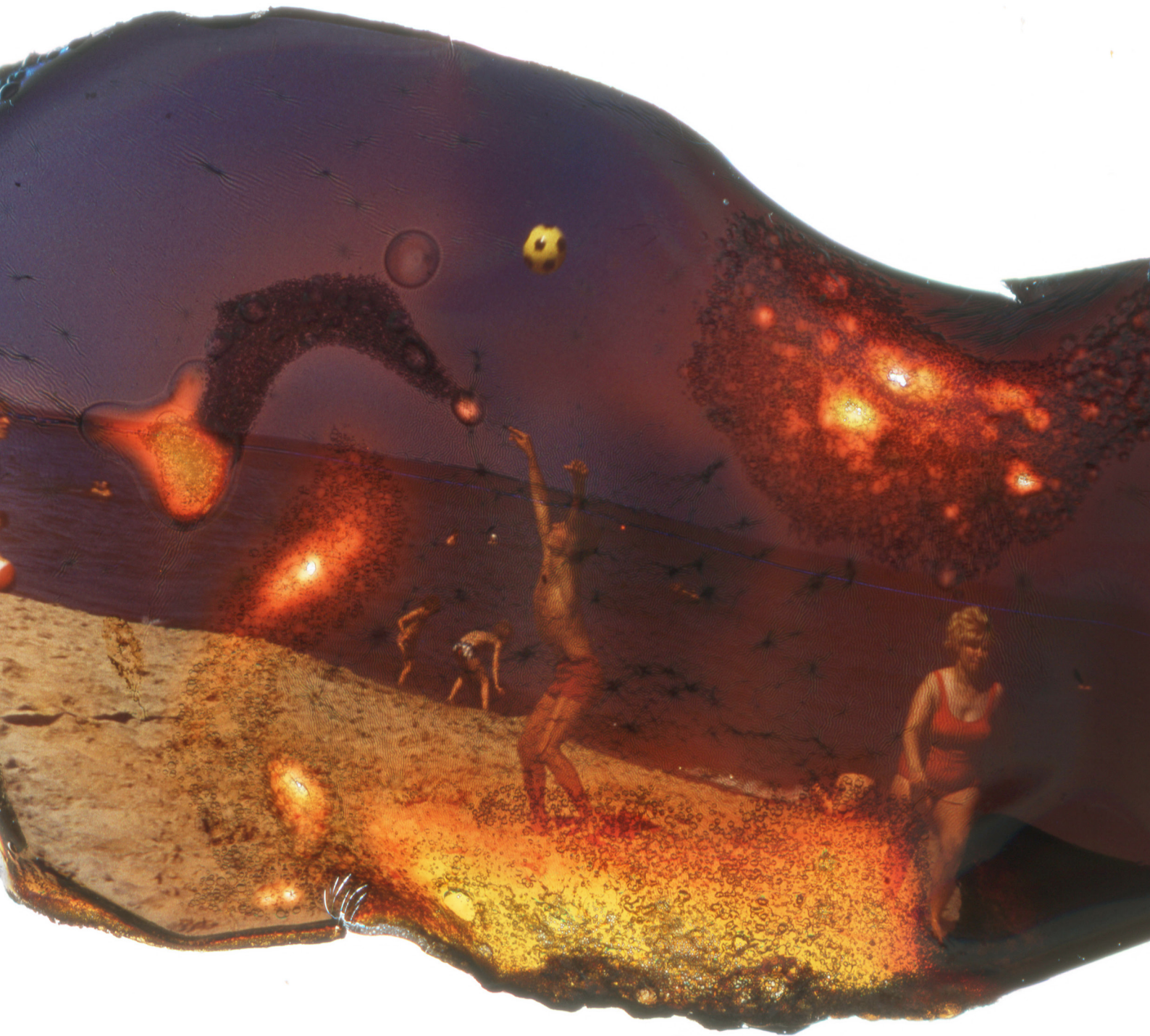
Could the lack of a structured approach to understanding vernacular photographs already be a form of deconstruction?

I animated pictures with my questions about them. I braid my history with theirs.
Uncovering their past is my present and future.²⁵

In Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author*, he argues that the meaning of a text should not be fixated on the intentions or identity of its creator. Instead, the text becomes a space for interpretation, where meaning is constructed by the reader, independent of the author's original intent, emphasizing the freedom of interpretation.²⁶ The death of the photographer (literally or conceptually) gives rise to the birth of the viewer as an active interpreter and co-creator of meaning.

²⁵ Beil, op. cit., p. 173

²⁶ Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*, edited by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 1977. p.142-148.



Chapter II

Destruction — Make Room, Clear Away

Destruction in art often refers to the deliberate act of damaging or dismantling artworks or objects as a form of artistic expression. Historically, it emerged in the 20th century, with movements like Dada and Fluxus challenging traditional aesthetics by using destruction to provoke thought and critique societal values. Artists like Gustav Metzger and Jean Tinguely used destruction to highlight themes of impermanence, consumerism, and renewal. It represents a way to break boundaries and reimagine the role of art.²⁷

Destruction has been used by artists in varied forms and for different motives. Yet, destruction is an urgent act, and like all creative actions, it stems from an urge to create. As philosopher Mikhail Bakunin said, “The urge to destroy is also a creative passion.”²⁸

The English term "destruction" is derived from the Latin *destruere*, meaning "to un-build." It combines the word *struere* (to build) with the prefix *de-* (away from, down from, out of), which conveys the idea of reversal. Destruction, therefore, is inseparable from its counterpart—construction—suggesting that an object destroyed may also be ‘liberated’ in the process.²⁹

Walter Benjamin, in his essay *The Destructive Character*, 1931.

The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred. The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason, he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too. He sees a way.³⁰

Make room. Clear away. For Benjamin, the destructive character is about creating new space. Photography, especially vernacular photography, is often burdened with many functions, definitions, and categories. This medium needs to be expanded by approaching it in a fresh way. Photography is not a fixed entity; it is in flux. Vernacular photography is not a category but part of

²⁷ Tate. “Auto-Destructive Art.” *Tate*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/auto-destructive-art>. Accessed 19 Nov. 2024.

²⁸ Anderson, Darran. “The Art of Creative Destruction.” *Artreview.com*, <https://artreview.com/the-art-of-creative-destruction-cornelia-parker-tate/>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2024.

²⁹ Spieker, Sven. *Destruction, Documents of Contemporary Art*. Whitechapel Gallery, 2017, p. 14.

³⁰ Benjamin, Walter. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Mariner Books Classics, 2019, p. 301.

the process of vernacular life. This medium continually transforms and shapes who we are and the world, reality, and imagination we inhabit.

How people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and the tomb of things that were, this unending story ³¹

In Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), according to him, Destruktion('Destructuring'):

It has nothing to do with a pernicious relativizing of ontological standpoints. The destructuring has just as little the negative sense of disburdening ourselves of the ontological tradition. On the contrary, it should stake out the positive possibilities of the tradition, and that always means fixing its boundaries... the destructuring does not wish to bury the past in nullity; it has a positive intent. Its negative function remains tacit and indirect.³²

Heidegger's concept of "Destruktion" doesn't mean simply rejecting or dismissing past ideas. Instead, it involves carefully breaking down past traditions and ways of thinking in a positive way, to understand their limits and possibilities. The goal isn't to erase history, but to rethink and reshape it, allowing us to build a new future from a better understanding of the past.

Memory doesn't reconstruct or make the past present; it remains elusive and ungraspable. Similarly, destruction is not about revealing what cannot be shown but about challenging representation itself. It introduces unpredictability into how we understand symbols and resists reducing existence to rigid systems. Destruction, therefore, remains an unfinished, open-ended process. ³³

In the same way, vernacular photographs should not be viewed solely as historical objects or mementos. Instead, we need to reimagine them in ways that free them from fixed narratives. Destruction offers a means to rethink vernacular photographs as a dynamic and open-ended medium. This approach also questions institutional perspectives on what is deemed "valuable" or "visually interesting" in vernacular photography. It allows us to expand the concept of vernacular photography within a broader visual and cultural system.

³¹ Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. cosmogenesis, 2024, p.170

³² Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Harper Collins, 1962, p. 23

³³ Galende, Federico. "That Strange Passion for Fleeing Criticism." *Destruction, Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Sven Spieker, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017, p. 40.

It is the task of the artist to discover the true meaning of destruction. And this meaning lies in the creative ferment contained in every act of destruction, because to create is to transform, that is, to destroy.³⁴

I was trying to make art and therefore I had to erase art.³⁵ — Robert Rauschenberg

³⁴ Pellegrini, Aldo. “Foundation for an Aesthetic of Destruction” *Destruction, Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Sven Spieker, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017, p. 73.

³⁵ Rauschenberg, Robert. *An interview with Robert Rauschenberg by Barbara Rose*, Vintage Bks, 1987, p. 65.

Afterlives — From Frame to Freed

There are millions of unknowns in photography, probably an infinite number. Like the expanding universe in reverse these unknowns rush inward, into the depths of the image. No matter how diligently we chase them down with microscopes and blow them up with enlarging lenses, we can never get our hands on them.³⁶

First attempt of destruction

At the start of my research, I followed the approach of artists like Joachim Schmid. I began as a collector and collected around 10,000 different types of photos, including photographic prints, film slides, and negative films. These physical objects, dating from the 1920s to the 1980s, display signs of aging and decolorization. Many photographs have handwritten dates and annotations, showing them to have once been deeply personal and intimate objects.

I purchased some of them in boxes without knowing what was inside. Some films had not been pre-scanned, so I digitized them manually at home. Others were bought online or from flea markets. I immersed myself in this vast ocean of images, allowing myself to be lost in this universe of physical visual objects.

Initially, I viewed, scanned, and categorized these photographs, but I did not yet have a clear direction for what to do with this collection. This process took me almost a year. In 2022, I was invited to participate in the sixth edition of the Wielkopolski Festiwal Fotografii im. Ireneusza Zjeżdżałki in Poznań and Konin. During that time, I focused more on destruction from a material perspective, exploring the question: What is the afterlife of the materiality of photographs?

In Chinese culture, a tradition often performed at funerals is *ZhiZha*, or Taoist paper art. This traditional craft is primarily used as an offering at Taoist funerals. *ZhiZha* offerings are paper objects such as houses, cars, clothing, and, in modern times, even laptops or iPhones. These items are burned during the funeral, symbolically transforming them into something that will provide for the deceased in the afterlife.³⁷

³⁶ Beil, op. cit., p. 17

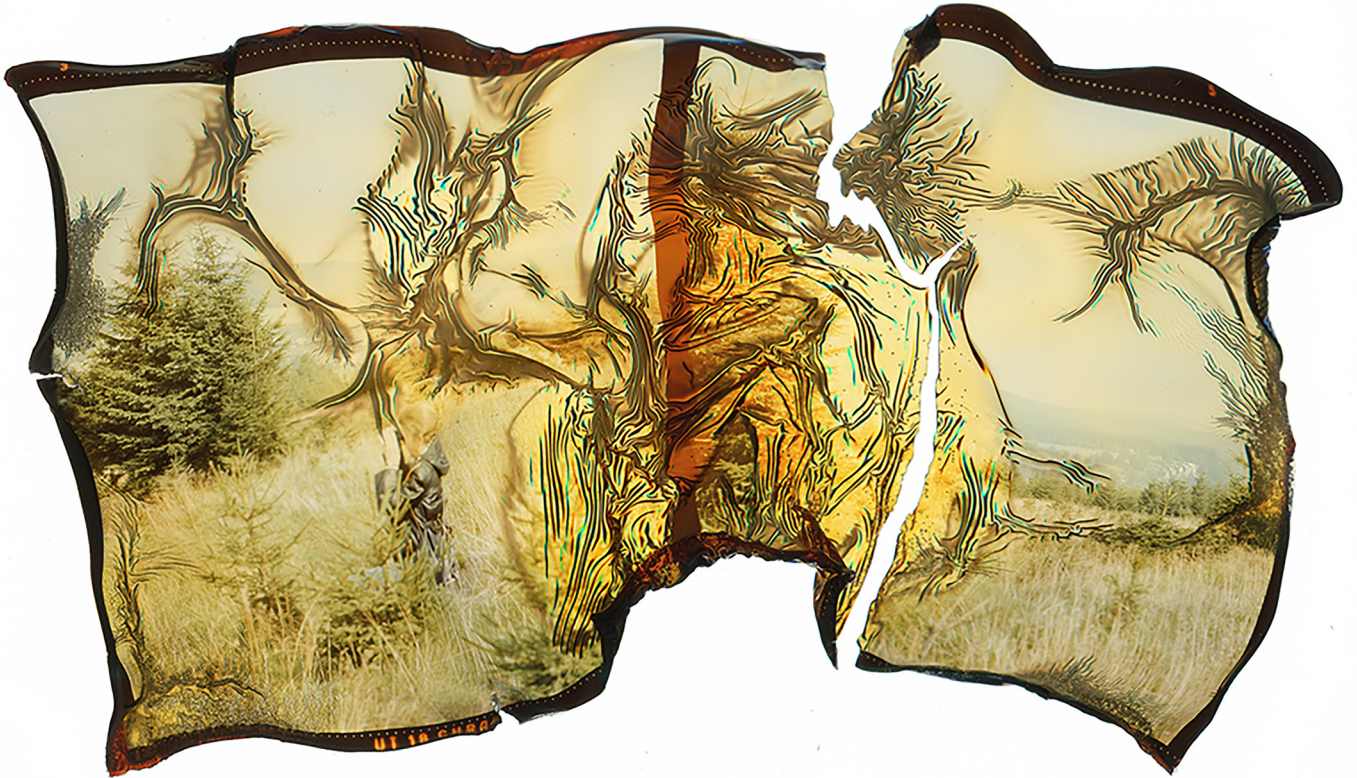
³⁷ “About: Zhizha.” *DBpedia*, <https://dbpedia.org/page/Zhizha>. Accessed 28 Nov. 2024.

I grew up immersed in ZhiZha culture and the idea of burning material and objects to transform them into the afterlife. I sought to apply this spiritual concept to explore the afterlife of these photographs, and I began to wonder if the idea of afterlives could also be approached materially.

I imagined that if I arrived in the afterlife, I wouldn't want a car or a house—I would want a photograph of my loved ones.

I began burning some photographs from my collection, but the results weren't great. Then I tried burning film, which worked better and was visually more interesting (yes, I admit I fell into the trap of seeking something visually pleasing at that point). I started selecting photographs with visual potential, burning them, and then enlarging the images. They look visually appealing.

Where Will They Live? 2022 (Photo series)



C-Type Print, 200x120cm



C-Type Print, 100x100cm



C-Type Print, 100x70cm



C-Type Print, 100x70cm



C-Type Print, 100x70cm



C-Type Print, 100x70cm



C-Type Print, 100x70cm



C-Type Print, 160x120 cm



C-Type Print, 100x70cm



Exhibition View of *Where Will They Live?* - solo exhibition at Centrum Kultury i Sztuki – DK Oskard, Konin. 2022

Part of Wielkopolski Festiwal Fotografii im. Ireneusza Zjeżdżałki 6. Wielkopolski Festiwal Fotografii im. I. Zjeżdżałki: „Krajobrazy wewnętrzne”

However, after the exhibition, I began to struggle. I realized I might have been using the idea of destruction in these photographs to tell the story of ZhiZha, a concept of material transformation rooted in spirituality, along with its aesthetic effect. But it didn't seem to be about using the destruction of the photographs to speak for the medium itself. I found myself questioning how to keep photography as the protagonist at all times, rather than focusing solely on what photography can contribute to the discussion of other topics.

Every vernacular photograph I've encountered has influenced me in some way, whether consciously or subconsciously. These images now reside in my mind, shaping my perspective in ways I can't always articulate. Attempting to represent vernacular photography through a selective group of images feels impossible at this point, much like trying to describe the vastness of the universe by pointing to a single star. These photographs have become an inseparable part of me, existing without hierarchy or order. In turn, I have become a part of them.

Second attempt of destruction

It's easier to ignore things we do not understand than it is to try to capture and comprehend them. This perceptual strategy may even be an evolutionary necessity. It makes sense that we would focus on what is known and suppress the rest, lest we be overcome by the detail of the world... But a comfort with ignorance comes at a cost for the rest of our lives. If we can't recognize what we don't know, especially when we're staring right at it, then what else do we miss? ³⁸

At the talk, *Whither the vernacular? // Talks on Everyday Imaging*, hosted by the Eidolon Centre in Hungary in 2023, Geoffrey Batchen showed a collection of photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. This collection includes a series of daguerreotypes, all of the same size, which the museum catalog simply describes as “daguerreotype plates with no image.” However, Batchen pointed out that these plates aren't without something to see. In fact, the lack of an image might actually allow us to observe more.

³⁸ Beil, op, cit., p. 53



A daguerreotype plate with no image, about 1850. Unknown artist/maker.
Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Without the distraction of a picture, we can focus on the physical qualities of the daguerreotype itself, its material base, and what lies beneath the typically admired surface. This leads us to reflect on the daguerreotype process, considering the materials used, the techniques involved in creating images, and the strengths and limitations of this photographic method. Essentially, these blank daguerreotype plates encourage us to think about their existence and role in the world on their own terms.³⁹

Looking at the collection of daguerreotype plates with no image, I feel a sense of freedom. They can become anything, any story we want to tell, or any visual content we imagine them to hold. These plates exist as a raw medium in their conceptual form, unconfined by any definition.

Like dreams, images are the manifest content which is only the surface over for what lies latent beneath. Thus, although much radical work on photography has shown us how to read the semiotics of photographs, it has not ventured much below the surface.⁴⁰

I have asked myself this question many times: how can I speak more about the medium itself rather than the images it holds? Rather than focusing on visual value, aesthetics, or nostalgic effects, how can I look at vernacular photography as a medium?

While struggling under piles of books on my desk, I noticed a positive slide that I had taped to my window a year ago. I used to display positive slides on my windows, just like hanging photos on a wall. Surprisingly, the image had started to fade due to exposure to sunlight and changing temperatures. I took the positive slide in hand, used a knife to open the plastic slide frame, and found a positive film taped inside it, protected by two small pieces of glass. I removed the glass and tape, took the positive film out, put the plastic frame back together, and then held the slide above my head against the sunlight.

³⁹ Eidolon Centre & Journal for Everyday Photography. *Geoffrey Batchen – Whither the Vernacular? // Talks on Everyday Imaging*. Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xnqmnv1p4ew&ab_channel=EidolonCentre%26JournalforEverydayPhotography. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.

⁴⁰ Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press, 1997. p. 210.

What I saw was an empty frame, but it was never an empty image in front of me. I could imagine anything I wanted this frame to hold, from the direct view outside my window to all my memories and imagination. This frame now seems capable of holding an entire universe. It can contain almost everything I can see with my eyes or mind.

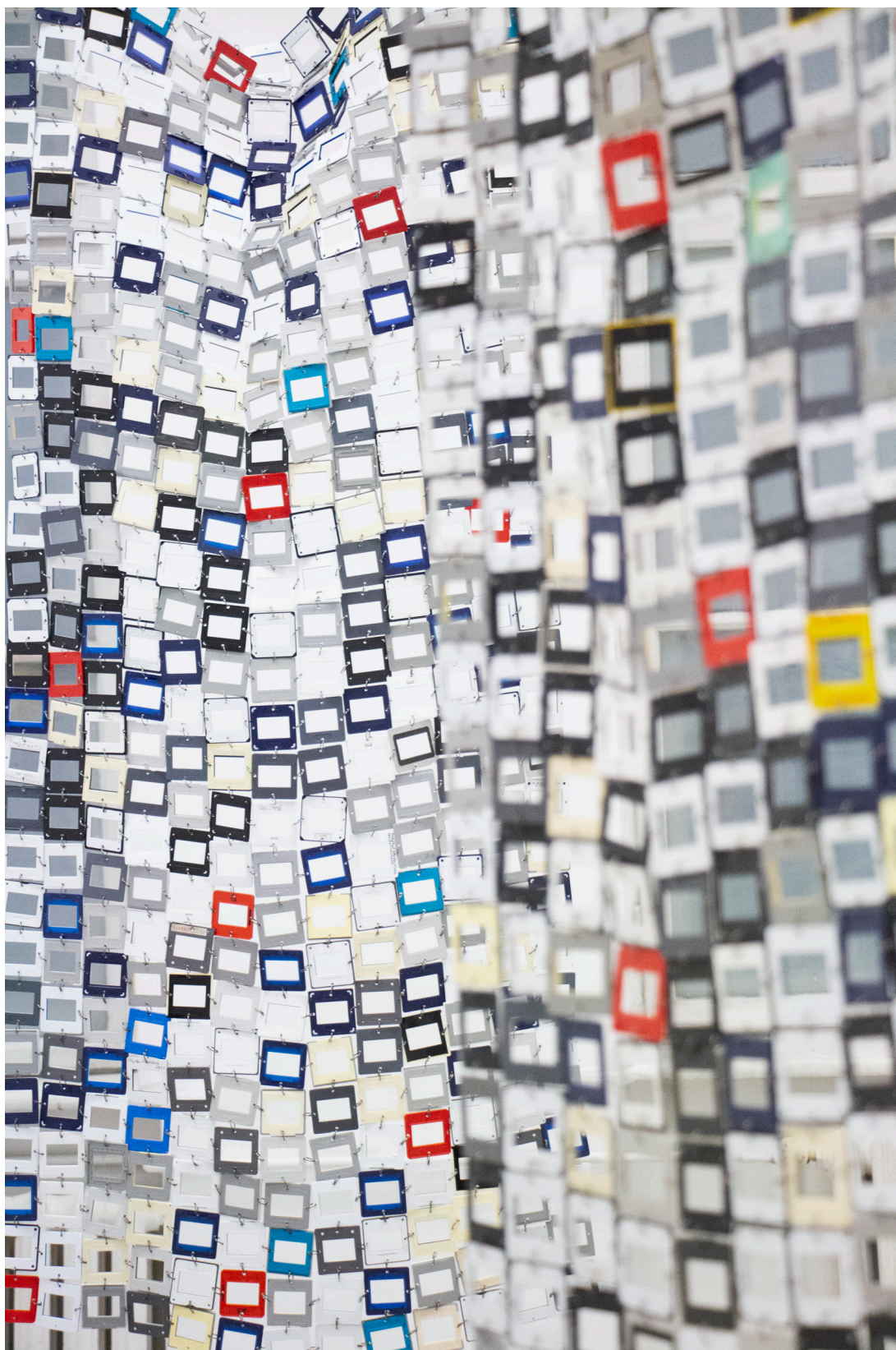
Whatever I see is held within this frame, yet it is also a projection of every frame that has shaped my vision.

I decided to remove my collection of positive films from their slide frames. When I look at the empty frames, they become the medium — a container, a projector, a placeholder for vernacular life, or a rectangular box of memory, knowledge, and subconsciousness.



De-framed, 2024

Object / Installation. slides, metal. 5x5 cm, 3265 pieces



Erased de Kooning as additive subtraction, the question of destruction then, could be seen in terms of positive and negative, or addition and subtraction. Additive subtraction as a contradiction that suggests a play of differences, rather than an absence of a present. ⁴¹

— Jasper Johns

The labor of removing the image feels like the opposite of what we do in daily life, as we are constantly seeing and taking more photographs rather than removing them. We scroll through thousands of new images every day, restlessly adding more and more visual data to our brains. The act of physically removing images from their frames gives me a completely different physical and visual experience, as well as a new relationship with those vernacular photos and the medium itself.

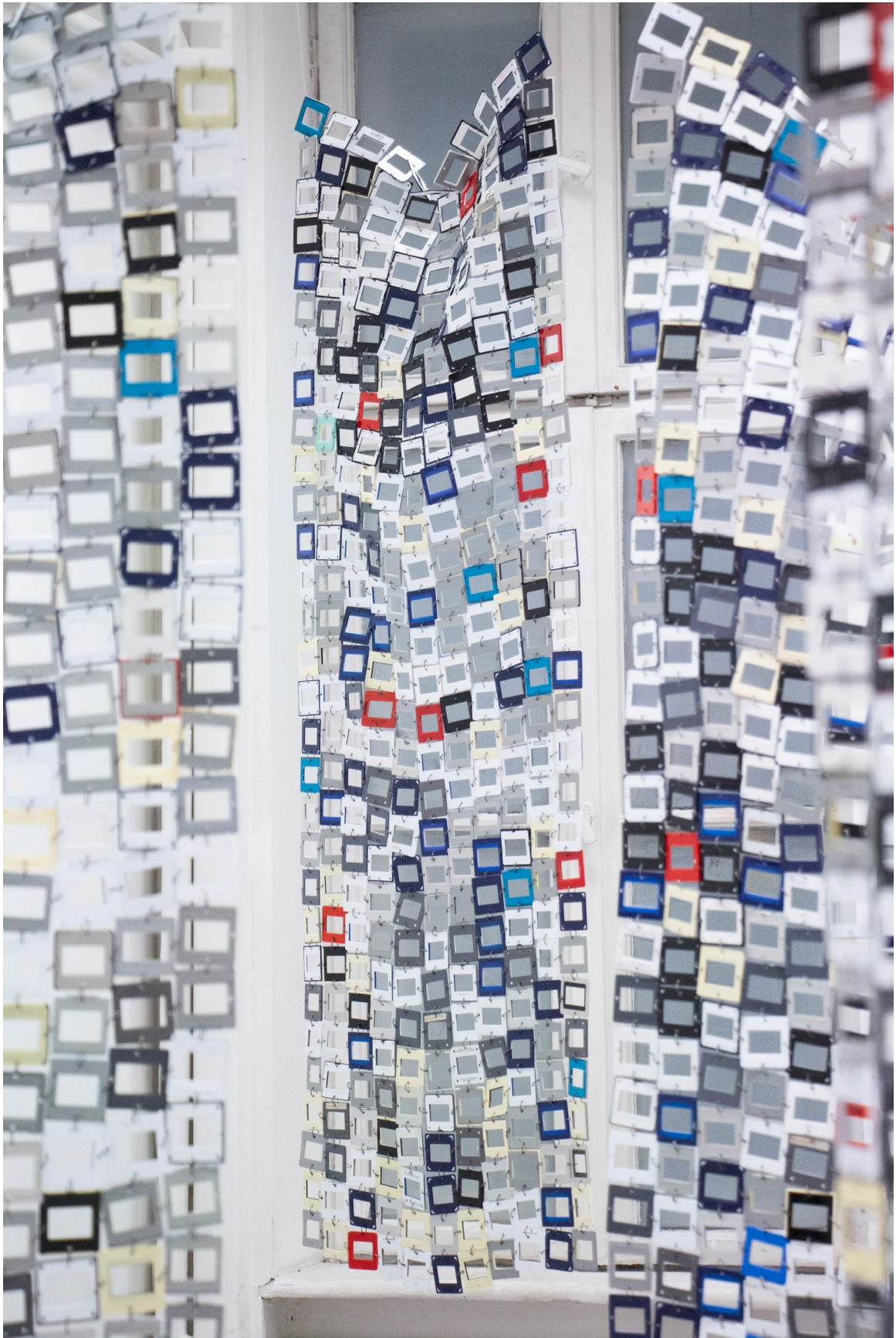
While carefully removing each positive film one by one, taking out the tape and the glass that held them, drilling holes in each frame, and connecting them with metal rings—I was reminded of the labor-intensive process of traditional photography. Rolling the film into the camera, developing it in the darkroom, testing and printing with chemicals, waiting for the prints to dry, and finally placing each photo in a frame or an album. In the case of positive slides, they were often projected in a collective setting to share special moments with others.

Photography in the past required different physical interactions, creating a deep connection between the photographer, the viewer, and the image itself. Making this work has given me a new relationship with these photographs. Each step is not just about “de-framing” them but also about having a new reflection on the medium itself.

I thought about the winter garden photograph in Roland Barthes's book, *Camera Lucida*, where Barthes reflects on photography and the death of his mother. The photograph of his mother as a little girl, standing in the Garden, is one Barthes refused to share because, for him, this photo meant the world, while to others, it would be just an ordinary, even meaningless snapshot. ⁴²

⁴¹ Galpin, Richard. “Erasure in Art: Destruction, Deconstruction and Palimpsest, 1998” *Destruction, Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Sven Spieker, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017, p. 129

⁴² Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hill & Wang, 1981, p. 73.



By never revealing the Winter Garden photograph, Barthes allows each reader to create their own version of it. This imagined version is neither entirely our own nor entirely Barthes's but a combination of both, shaped by all the different photographs stored in our visual memory. We create the Winter Garder photograph in our minds, a photograph that bruises us yet one we have never touched.

Destruction and annihilation are, from the artist's point of view, antagonistic terms. The destruction of an object does not annihilate it; it confronts us with a new reality of the object, it imbues it with a meaning that it did not previously have.⁴³

Slides are also objects in their own right. Slides require an act of projection to be seen; the image only appears when light passes through the film. Even without a projector, they must be held against the light. Each of them became a screen itself. Additionally, the word "projection" as a verb can refer to a psychological concept, such as the act of perceiving a mental object as spatially and sensibly objective, or the attribution of one's ideas, feelings, or attitudes to other people or objects.

44

Like images, what they project onto us is also what we are projecting onto them.

In the 1970s, slides were commonly used for school lectures, conferences, and presentations and later became popular at gatherings to bring people closer together. The slide frame served as a tool for holding and projecting collective memory, identity, knowledge, and culture. After all, vernacular life is a shared experience. Moreover, positive film is not easy to replicate. While the slide frame itself may be mass-produced, the images it holds are unique, making each frame special in its own way.

⁴³ Pellegrini, Aldo. "Fundamentos de Una Estética de La Destrucción." Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art in the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde, edited by Ines Katzenstein, Museum of Modern Art, 2004, p. 36.

⁴⁴ "Definition of PROJECTION." *Merriam-webster.com*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/projection>. Accessed 8 Dec. 2024.





*De-framed, 2024 **

Object / Installation. slides, metal. 5x5 cm, 3265 pieces





Afterlives — From Freeze to Unfreeze

It's the essence of those normal moments that I am exploring, the intensity of feeling in them. That is what I have been trying to do for all these years. Really, I am an anthropologist of the small meaningful moments.⁴⁵ — Jonas Mekas

While working on a large collection of vernacular photographs, I feel like I'm watching a film by Jonas Mekas or becoming part of his poetic diary film. Viewing vernacular photographs evokes both confusion and comfort. Confusion arises because these images feel like a journey through time, as if time becomes abstract. Everything happening in the photograph seems to unfold right in front of me. They seem so alive, uncanny, and familiar, like echoes of my own memories.

The comfort comes from the connection between myself and these unknown images, or perhaps from the connection to the lives of others. There is an overlap between my personal memories and the collective memories captured in these photographs.

Looking at these photographs reminds me of my own everyday images. With Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept of vernacular photography, I realize that my photos, too, will one day become vernacular when they no longer serve their original purpose. Perhaps, after my death, when no one remembers or knows me, my photos might end up in the hands of a stranger, just like how I came upon my collection. They will become nameless and homeless, yet still part of the vernacular. They will testify to my ordinary (or extraordinary) life and perhaps continue to produce meaning in the world.

In 1965, I started to destroy records: scratch them. Pinch holes in them, break them. By playing them over and over again (which destroyed the needle and often the record player too) an entirely new music was created. ⁴⁶ – Milan Knížák

⁴⁵ Pinkerto, Nick, and Jeremy Rossen. "Scenes from the Life of a Happy Man...The Films of Jonas Mekas." *Harvardfilmarchive.org*, 2017, <https://harvardfilmarchive.org/programs/scenes-from-the-life-of-a-happy-man-the-films-of-jonas-mekas>.

⁴⁶ Sven, op, cit, p.56

I decided to print many of my personal photos from my digital archive. After printing them on photographic paper, I scratched away only the surface, the pigment layer of the images. The image then separated from the photographic paper, turning into tiny fragments. The visual representation of my history became fluid, unidentifiable, abstract, and fragmented.

Using my own photographs, knowing that they would one day become vernacular and enter a larger visual system. This recognition removed my nostalgia and fear of disappearing, as I realized that my everyday photos and everyone else's would eventually become part of a much larger visual universe, influencing, affecting, and shaping the world.

Scratching the photograph's surface is both a physical and abstract way of separating an image from its body. Scratching typically removes things from the surface or reveals what lies beneath; I believe I was trying to do both. The removal became part of the transformation, as the image changed form into tiny scraps, and it was also an attempt to uncover what lies underneath an image.

At first, the action may seem violent, especially since I used the knife as a tool for scratching. I was confronted with my memories, each carrying a certain sentimental value. I scratched out my face, the faces of people I care about, places I have visited, and special events and memories. Although my photographs are prints from my digital archives and can be replicated, the act of destruction still felt intense. It was a strange sensation as if I were trying to push myself forward in life while imagining what would happen to my photographs after they became vernacular (or after my death.)

I then melted the image pieces together with wax, creating a new kind of object. The light green color of the objects resulted from the photographs' mixed pigments.



Photographs after scratched.

New Ways Of Old Seeing, 2024

Objects. Wax, Photographs. 17x7x2 cm. Total 165 Pieces



Wax, as a material, has a long history associated with memory. In ancient Rome, death masks, called *imagines*, were created by pressing wax directly onto the face of the deceased, resulting in a strikingly lifelike resemblance. These masks were displayed during elite funerals and served as a tangible link between the past and present.

Life masks gained popularity in Renaissance and early modern Europe, particularly among loved ones and celebrities. Historically, wax masks provided a way for people to confront death. The *imagines* acted as a figurative shield against the finality of death, preserving a person's memory as a "living" image. Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, who believed in the soul and some form of an afterlife, wax masks served to preserve the memory of the dead and protect them from being forgotten.⁴⁷

Death masks are haunting relics from a pre-photography era. However, with the invention of photography in the mid-19th century, these masks became less common, as photographs offered a faster and more accurate way to preserve a person's likeness.⁴⁸

The invention of photography didn't lessen our need to understand or cope with death; it just changed how we do it. Now, each everyday photograph we take is like a death or life mask, a record of our brief time in this world.

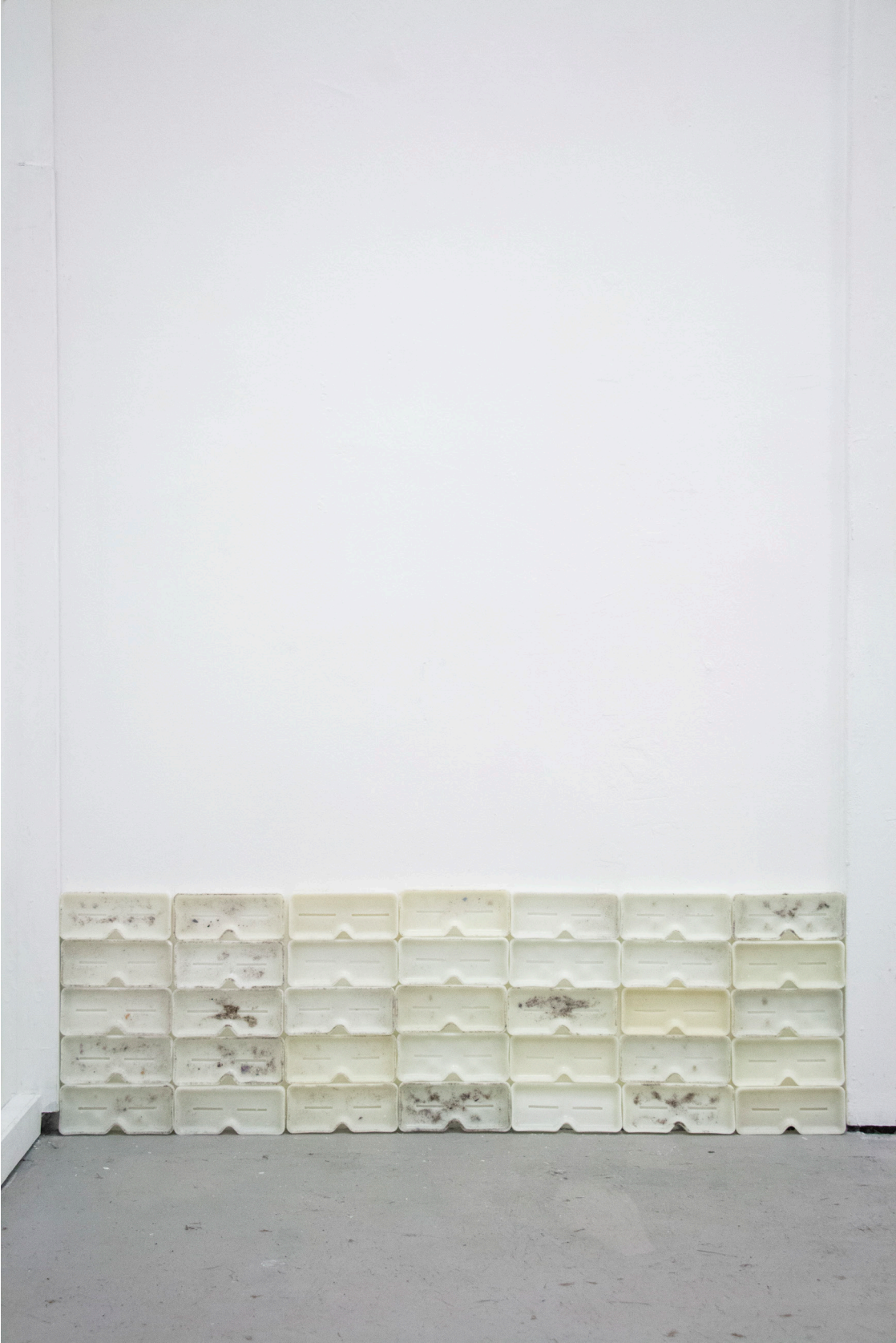
Sometimes, looking at vernacular photographs feels like perceiving the world through the death masks of others.

⁴⁷ Pictolic. "26 Death Masks of Famous Historical Figures." *Pictolic.com*, 13 Feb. 2024, <https://pictolic.com/en/article/26-death-masks-of-famous-historical-figures>.

⁴⁸ *A Haunting Photo Collection of Famous People's Death Masks, 1300-1950 - Rare Historical Photos*. 2021, <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/death-masks-famous-people/>.

*New Ways Of Old Seeing, 2024 **

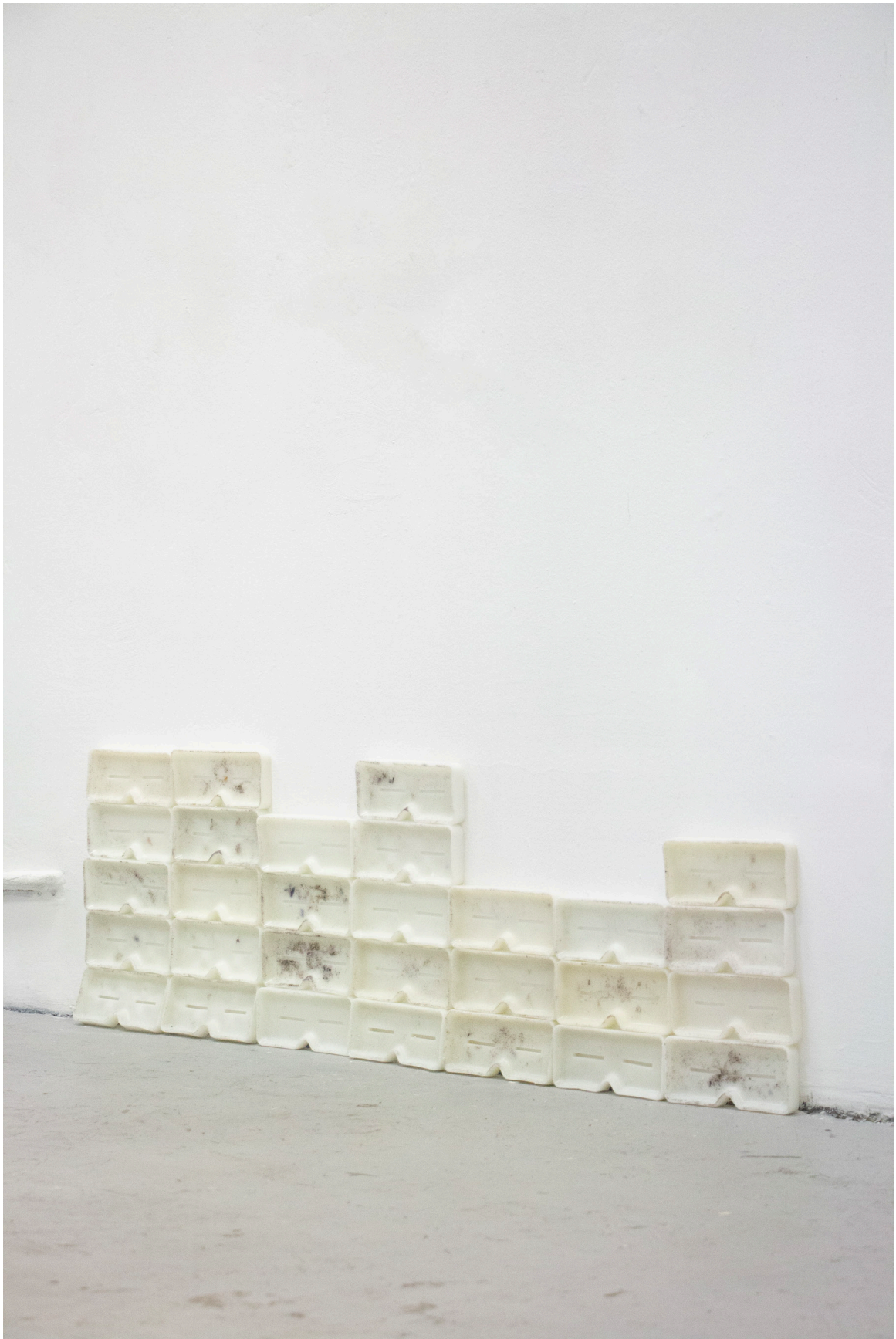
Objects. Wax, Photographs. 17x7x2 cm. Total 165 Pieces

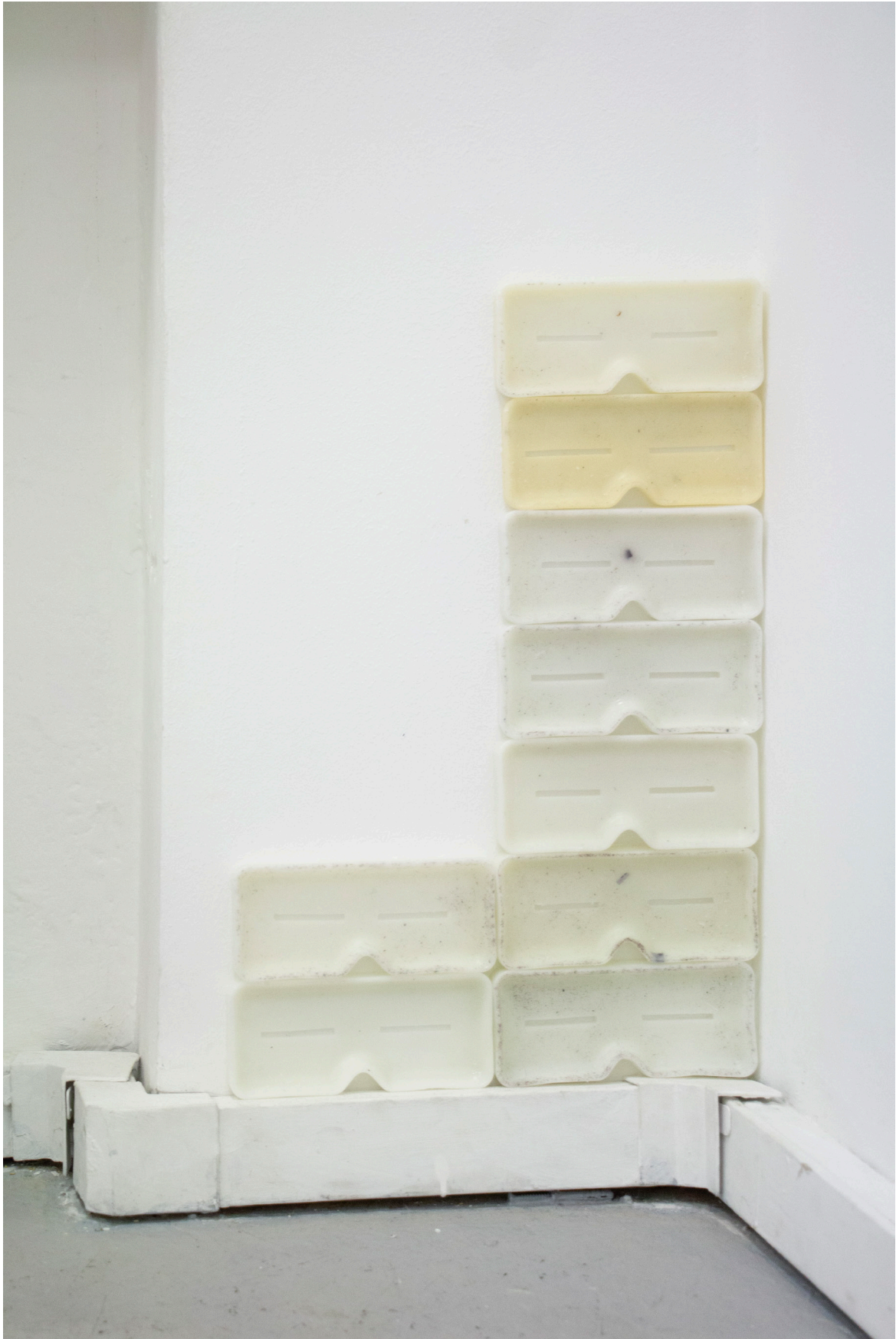


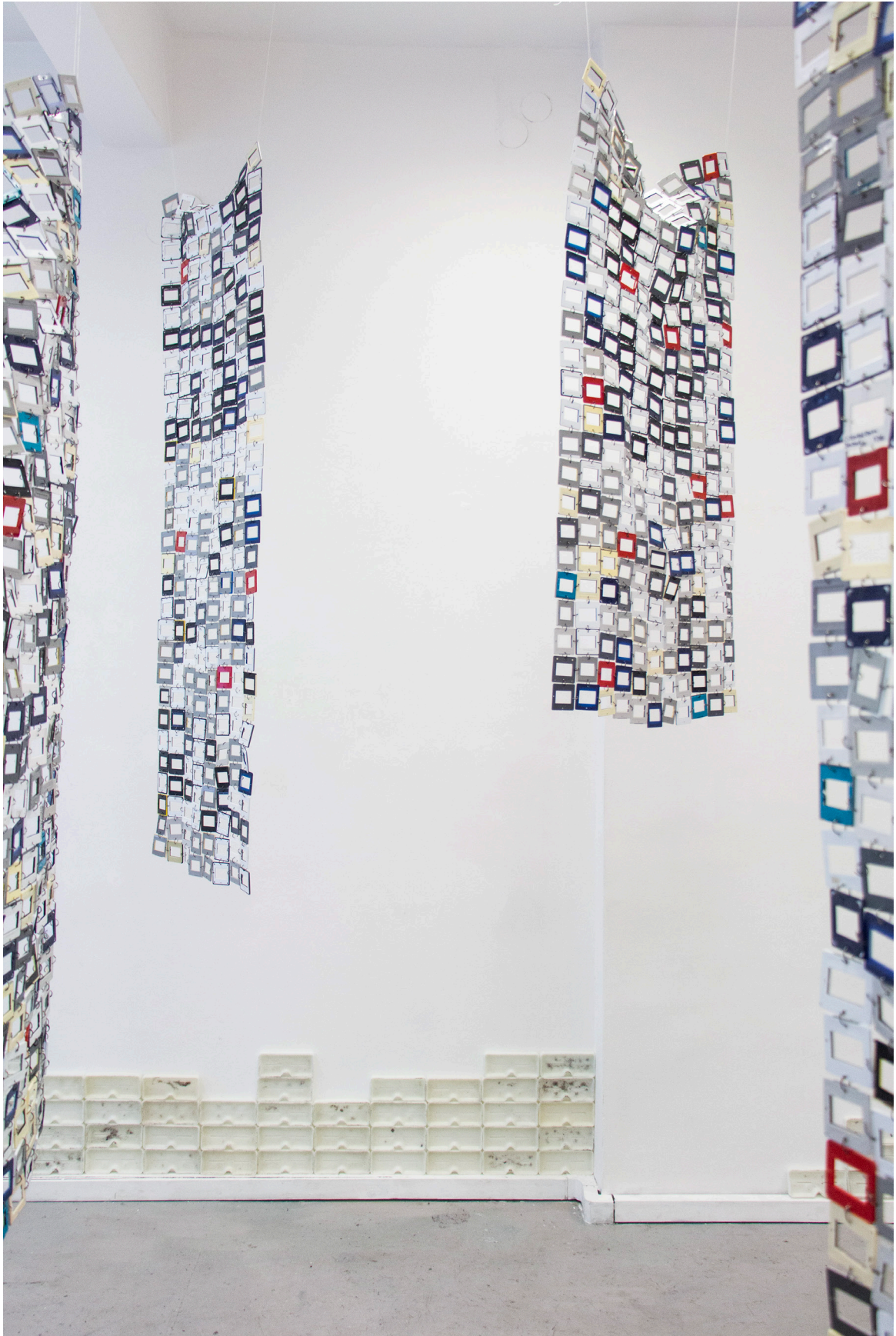




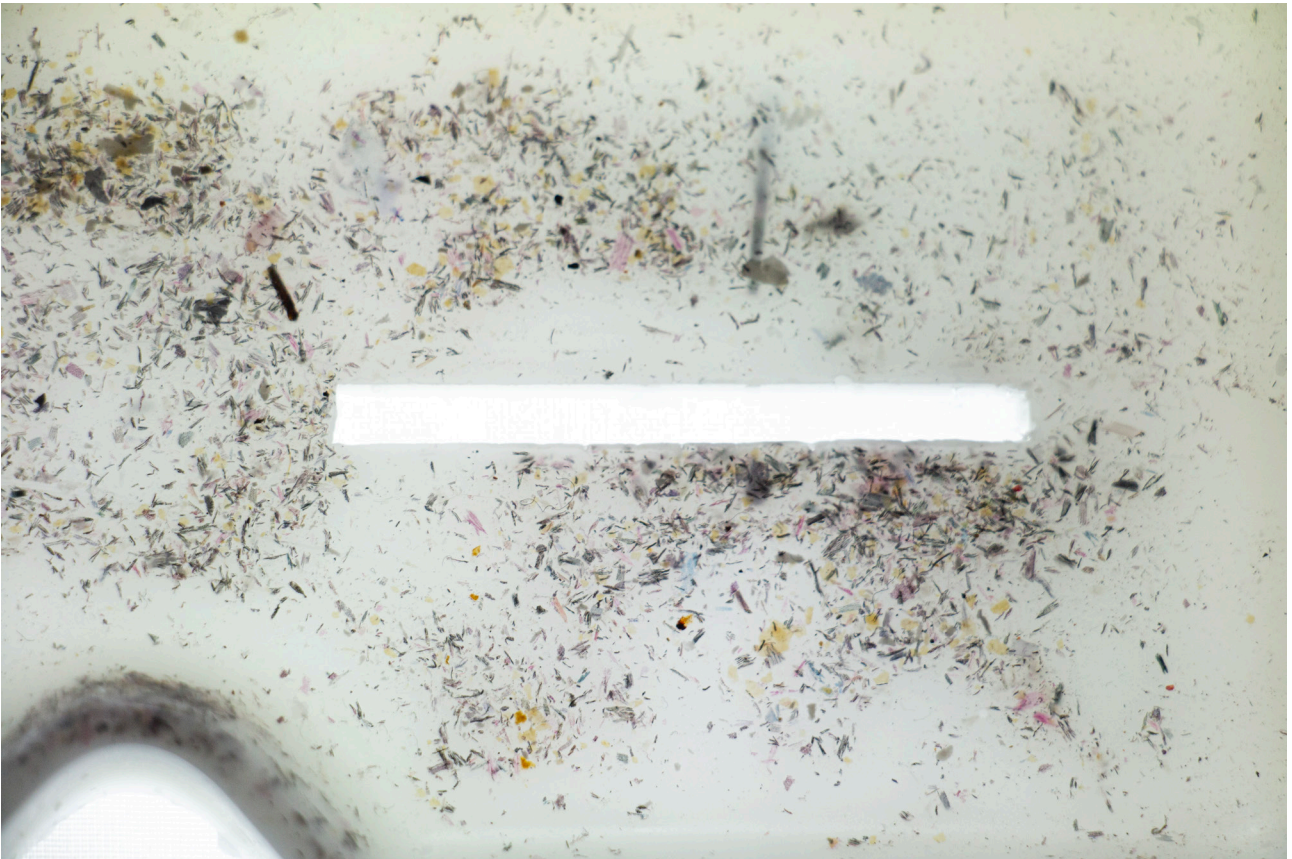










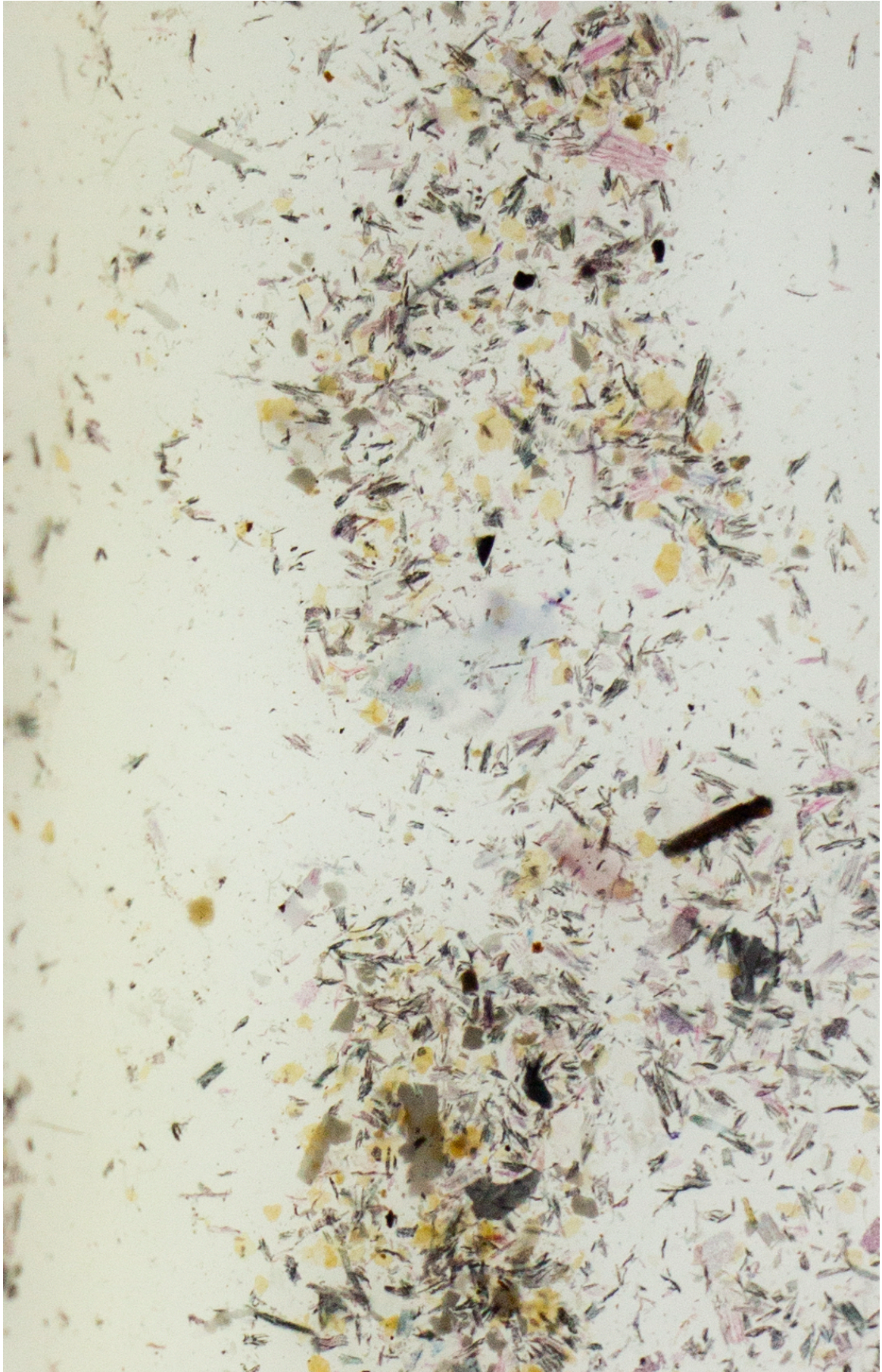


Close-up of the object, with photo pieces embedded in wax.



Close-up of the object, with photo pieces embedded in wax.

*** *De-framed* and *New Ways of Old Seeing* are the final artistic works of the research.**



Conclusion

Everyday Mixed Reality

The development of technology is profoundly transforming our daily lives now, leading us toward an unimaginable and nearly unthinkable future. The line between physical and virtual, generated and non-generated, and our entire definition of reality is shifting.

While modern mixed-reality headsets, such as the Apple Vision Pro, may appear to seamlessly integrate reality and the virtual world, there is, in fact, no direct view of your physical surroundings. What you perceive as your real-life environment is actually a digital reconstruction created by cameras that capture the scene in front of you and augment it with virtual elements.



Apple advertisement for the Apple Vision Pro, 2024.

“Apple Vision Pro seamlessly blends digital content with your physical space. So you can work, watch, relive memories, and connect in ways never before possible. The era of spatial computing is here.” — Apple Vision Pro’s advertisement ⁴⁹

⁴⁹ “Apple Vision Pro.” *Apple*, <https://www.apple.com/apple-vision-pro/>. Accessed 8 Nov. 2024.

This new perception of reality will directly alter our everyday lives, creating a completely different set of understandings, aesthetics, presentations, forms of existence, functions, values, and impacts. How we understand the world and engage with daily life will undergo a dramatic shift, as will our everyday photographs.



Apple advertisement for the Apple Vision Pro, 2024, showing how to take a picture with the device.

Photography is entering a new era, and physical photographs may become increasingly rare. One day, taking a picture might be as simple as the blink of an eye and may no longer even require a camera. Images can already be created from text or voice using Artificial Intelligence (AI), forming realistic everyday scenes without anything physically existing. This shift could dramatically change our everyday photography practices.

It's worth noting that AI image generators learn by training on billions of images, many of which are everyday and vernacular photographs. One prominent source of such data is the once globally popular photo-sharing platform Flickr. For example, the Yahoo Flickr Creative Commons 100 Million (YFCC100M) dataset contains over 100 million images and videos, which researchers use

to train AI models. These datasets help teach AI systems to recognize, interpret, and generate visual content.⁵⁰

Ironically, the AI-generated images, learned from our everyday and vernacular photographs, will likely be uploaded by us back onto the internet. In the future, our everyday photographs may be entirely created by AI. What's most fascinating is this cyclical process, almost like a "circle of life." Is this the afterlife of vernacular photographs? Like the Ouroboros, continually devouring itself and being reborn, it represents a unity of all things, both material and spiritual, which never disappear but perpetually changes from the eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation.⁵¹

In this case, do I still need to show you any new images? I'm sure you've already seen it all.

While this research attempts to view vernacular photography as a medium, it also questions how this medium will continue to be part of everyday human life. The tiny fragments of my own photographs which are embedded in the wax object, may not be visible or readable as images, but they exist just like visual data, physically, mentally, or digitally. They are active agents in changing how I see the world. One day, mixed-reality headsets, AI, and other emerging technologies will evolve and blend into our everyday existence, creating a new, mixed reality (or perhaps this has already begun). Everyday photographs will become products of a fluid, reality-mixed world of imagination.

⁵⁰ Bart, Thomee, et al. "YFCC100M: The New Data in Multimedia Research." *arXiv [Cs.MM]*, 2015, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1503.01817>.

⁵¹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Ouroboros." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Oct. 2024.

A Photogenic Future

In the 1980s, the photographic world was very much concerned with proving the point that photography can be art, that was the big topic, because most museums did not yet collect photographs, and actually the status of photography as an art form was questioned by many people and the established art world, I always have doubt about this attitude, because it is pretty obvious that photography can be art, but the interesting point is it can be much more than art.⁵² — Joachim Schmid

Not only does photography have a future, but also that it actually is the future. As we increasingly experience reality through and as photography, the photographic medium functions as an active agent in shaping both us and the world. Photography is, of course, not the only medium through which concerns are articulated, but due to its posited—even if fictitious—role as a mirror of the world, it allows each subsequent generation to ask questions about its own self-image and self-projection, a process unfolding across the increasing liquidation of social foundations and structures.⁵³ — Joanna Zylińska

⁵² Eidolon Centre & Journal for Everyday Photography, *Joachim Schmid – Bilder von Der Strasse & Other People's Photographs // Talks on Everyday Imaging*. Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4FTYM66kAA&ab_channel=EidolonCentre%26JournalforEverydayPhotography. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.

⁵³ Eidolon Centre & Journal for Everyday Photography, *Joanna Zylińska – on Our Photographic Future // Talks on Everyday Imaging*. Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZ2tmPs3n2M>. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.

In modern society, we strive to be progressive, emphasizing the value of every human being, regardless of race, background, gender, or nationality. This drive for inclusivity shapes our efforts to understand and respect each culture as we move toward a classless society. In this context, shouldn't we also extend the same attitude to the photographs that capture all forms of everyday life? These images are not just documents but active participants in our shared human experience. They connect us to our memories and identities, representing the essence of who we are while shaping how future generations will understand our present. Far from being the antithesis of art or inferior to it, these vernacular photographs are vital components of our visual culture.

This brings us to the concept of the afterlife —how photographs change over time, taking on new meanings and perspectives. Today's flood of digital images, combined with physical photos from the past, forms a vast, interconnected visual landscape. These images circulate, evolve, and influence us in countless ways, breaking free from fixed definitions. From this perspective, my use of destruction isn't about erasing an image; it's about reconsidering and freeing it from conventional meanings. By dismantling the familiar, we create space for new interpretations, inviting us to see the afterlife of a photograph as a dynamic, ongoing transformation.

Unlike Milan Knížák's destruction of music to create an entirely new piece of music, my approach to destruction does not aim to create new photographs. Instead, it seeks to question how vernacular photography functions as a medium within a broader visual system. By deconstructing visual representations, I hope to encourage a new, non-hierarchical way of seeing and engaging with this fluid medium.

As I mentioned earlier, AI-generated images are created from vast collections of everyday human photographs, such as those found on platforms like Flickr. This process demonstrates how our visual landscape and aesthetic sensibilities are blended into a global, collective visual practice. It brings to mind the myth of Ouroboros: are we, in a sense, consuming our own tail? Are the photographs we produce being fed back to us, creating only an illusion of newness in everyday images? Or is this a natural cycle, moving forward in a loop rather than a straight line?

Everyday photographs have always been tightly connected to technology. The more convenient and innovative the technology, the more everyday photographs are produced. We may soon encounter a world filled with mixed reality or simulated everyday photographs, a phenomenon that, to some extent, may already exist. Yet, even these images capture the history of our time.

I cannot claim to prescribe or determine the future direction of visual culture. However, as Joanna Zylińska said, "not only does photography have a future, but also that it actually is the future." While we cannot predict where this future might lead, perhaps into hyper-reality or hyper-fake environments, one thing is certain: we must remain critical observers and thoughtful participants in this evolving visual landscape. Ultimately, we all have a stake in how everyday photographs shape our shared humanity over time.

If photography is the future, it is inseparably tied to the past, shaped by countless afterlives of images, endlessly reimagined and transformed over time. These evolving afterlives shape the present, which, in turn, builds toward photography's future.

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