

Record of the International Symposium for the 20th Anniversary of the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum:  
Why Are Photography Museums Necessary?

# Photography: A Promiscuous Life

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In this presentation, I discuss the slippery medium of photography, and why museums that focus specifically on the medium, such as Tokyo Photographic Art Museum (TOP), are important. Equally, I look at why strong photography departments within museums are necessary. I hope to demonstrate why photography, in all its forms, needs to be a full participant in institutions that focus on art as much as those that focus on media, and why we need to consider what this medium is within its historical, political, social, and aesthetic contexts.

It is nearly 20 years since I was first invited to TOP, for the 2nd Tokyo International Photo-Biennale in 1997. I brought Australian artist Patricia Piccinini to that biennale. Today her work is more concerned with creating creatures in the world than digitally within a photograph.

In 1997, in Australia as elsewhere, there was an ongoing discussion about the relationship of photography to art; it is worth remembering that Australian art museums had only been collecting photography since the 1970s. I noted then that photography is used in many ways: to make family snaps, to document evidence, as a window on the world, and — importantly — to present complex ideas about the relationship between images, reality and the imagination. These aspects make photography difficult to categorize, which poses a problem to institutions.

In 1997 the first camera phone by cell phone carrier J-Phone had yet to be released (It came out in 2000 in Japan) and the internet had only moved out of universities three years before. The subsequent online image explosion has called everything into question. My view, however, is that this tsunami of images makes the understanding of photography in all its forms even more urgent. Just as we need to understand our spoken and written languages, from literary to vernacular perspectives and from popular to academic viewpoints, so we need to understand this visual language which is ever more pervasive. I should note a difference here: spoken language can be seen as human necessity, while written and visual languages are utilized for many different (and secondary) reasons.



In the first half of this presentation I present some ideas about the photographic medium. In the second half I use the major exhibition *The Photograph and Australia*, which was seen in Sydney in 2015 and curated by myself, as a case study for the importance of collecting, exhibiting, and writing our own histories with photography. The related book can be acquired online.

❖ 1 For the web page of the exhibition refer to <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/the-photograph-and-australia>. Accessed October 25, 2016.

Fundamental to my thinking as a writer and curator is the constant consideration of the question, "What is a photograph?" The title of this presentation, *Photography: A Promiscuous Life*, is taken from a blog post by the Calcutta-based writer Aveek Sen. Sen was one of the first contributors, early in 2012, to *Still Searching*, the ongoing blog hosted by Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland. It publishes current ideas about the photographic medium — I recommend dipping in to it. Other contributors have included Geoffrey Batchen, Charlotte Cotton, Trevor Paglen, Jodi Dean, and English academic Elizabeth Edwards, who considers "institutions and the production of photographs."

❖ 2 For a list of contributors of *Still Searching* refer to <https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/authors>, Accessed October 25, 2016.

Aveek Sen writes in his first post:

...photography, like love, is one of those irrepressibly miscellaneous topics of conversation that can't help opening up, in a rather unruly way, into other topics even as one tries to discipline one's thoughts into some sort of purity and rigor.

...

Historically and in its essential nature, isn't photography — the word yoked to writing at its root — suited to this alluring, though often discomfiting, openness more than any other medium? And what is this openness but an engagement with the fluidity and accidents of life itself, the outer as well as the inner life?

Yet, paradoxically, in spite of this openness, photography often leaves one with the sense of a dead end, an impasse.

This happens at two levels. First, a photograph is always a photograph of something "out there."

Hence, its relationship with the world is, at its core, a closed circuit (although it is precisely this deadlock with the real and the material that could give the photograph its mysterious or heroic quality).

Second, photography is now perhaps the one truly democratic medium: mastering its rudiments is like learning to speak, write, or use a phone.

❖ 3 Aveek Sen, "Photography – A Promiscuous Life," *Still Searching* (blog). Article published February 29, 2012. [https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26913\\_photography\\_a\\_promiscuous\\_life](https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26913_photography_a_promiscuous_life), Accessed October 25, 2016.

Sen goes on to unravel the promiscuous mixing that the photograph is always indulging in: namely, the fact that it is necessarily of something "out there," and yet it always escapes being only of that thing out there — it contains "an

engagement with the fluidity and accidents of life itself," as he notes.

The photograph therefore always fails to deliver the world as we think we know it and easily presents something we did not know was there. It is the deadlock between the medium and the world which gives the photograph its mysterious, if not heroic, quality. Further, the medium is democratic, given the camera's accessibility in the industrialized world; this has led to an ever-expanding range of possibilities for photography. That is, photography constantly adapts to each technological change, and while the older technologies appear to be shed as a reptile loses its skin, in fact they are often incorporated — according to commercial logic as well as photographers' wills. (I return to this idea of the medium as democratic later in this presentation.)

Instagram and other digital apps allow one to make images look "old"; Snapchat provides endless options for self-improvement. Simultaneously, many artists are exploring old techniques such as cyanotypes, daguerreotypes, tintypes, and so on. As we come full circle, it is worth briefly reviewing the evolution of photography.

The birth of the medium was broadcast around the world nearly 180 years ago. As cumbersome as the practice of photography was then, its advent inspired all. Artists, writers, and many others could see the medium's political, social, and commercial applications. Photography enabled huge public crazes as technological improvements made greater access and distribution possible. No other "thing" in the world had ever operated like the photograph.

So personal, self-referential, imaginative was this mirror with a memory, and yet so clinical, evidential, useful for documenting the known world and exploration of the unknown. So precious and unique as a daguerreotype and so eminently marketable, saleable, and collectible as a *carte de visite* (as soon as it was figured out how to make multiple copies). How helpful as an aid to painters and policemen and scientists. How beloved to people who wanted mementoes of what they had seen and things that they could not experience but wanted proximity to.

How loud were the denunciations of those who knew that the world had changed forever with the advent of photography and did not like it. Correspondingly, how much fun everyone had with the arrival of the Brownie camera in the late nineteenth century. Probably as much fun as with the arrival of the mobile phone camera little more than one hundred years later.

One of the drives of photography since its birth has been toward instantaneity — the capacity to revisit what we captured within a split second. Given twenty-first-century screen resolution, we no longer even need to print the photograph out. We no longer have a paper object unless we really want it, and given the jewel-like qualities of modern screens and the ability to zoom

in, for many purposes the screen image is enough. The photograph as object, therefore, can now reside most intimately with its delivery host, and it can transit from A to B at the same speed as any data.

❖<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Cotton and Alex Klein, *Words Without Pictures* (New York: Aperture, 2010): 36.

In 2010, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art published a book called *Words Without Pictures*.<sup>❖<sup>4</sup></sup> It contains the transcript of a discussion moderated by Charlotte Cotton and called — that hoary chestnut — "Is Photography Really Art?", in which artist Michael Queenland asks, well, what is art? The advent of photography in the nineteenth century forced that question out into the open, and it has not left the table since. Now that question is further complicated by others: what is a photograph, given that a photograph may never exist beyond the screen? Can a screen-based image be art? This muddling of what a photograph is or can be operates in a dynamic relationship to what art can be, and has done so since photography's inception.

Can a photograph be art only if it is printed out and presented on a wall? There are magazine or book photographers who aspire to the wall — for example, the American Annie Leibovitz. In earlier decades — that is, pre-digital — the aspiration of photographers was to make it into magazines such as *Life* or *Vogue*. Magazines were then largely superseded by the wall as a host. What is it about the wall?

Or should that be what *was* that about the wall? With the accessibility of the screen, is the wall to fade from view for the still image? Can the photograph exist as an object anymore? Younger photographers who are producing their own books and zines tell me yes, though they have no interest in waiting for exhibition spaces; they are happy to put their work out in the world in the form of self-made publications, or float them on screens.

In her 2010 book *Look: Contemporary Australian Photography Since 1980*, Australian academic Anne Marsh writes:

Any attempt to define the pared-down essence of photography seems doomed to failure. Historically, modernist photographers argued that art photography needed to separate itself from the commercial market — to distance itself from documentary, advertising and photojournalism — and sought to establish the essential formal qualities of the medium, yet their plan failed to contain photography as an artistic territory. Throughout the modernist period, artists have crossed the borders between art photography and other photographies. Many photographers operated across art, fashion, advertising and documentary modes. It is this multivalent language which is photography, a language which crosses borders, that invigorated the medium. This is as true today as it was in 1973 — before the art boom in photography — when Susan Sontag argued that "all art aspires to the condition of photography."<sup>❖<sup>5</sup></sup>

❖<sup>5</sup> Anne Marsh, *Look: Contemporary Australian Photography Since 1980* (South Yarra: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2010): 379  
See also Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), 148.

As photography drives toward instantaneity and digital technology, it is also pushing — as it always has — for multiplicity, repetition, seriality. This has partly been motivated by commercial and capitalist requirements, and was accelerated by scientific and (to some extent) artistic, mnemonic, and mimetic needs.

Was this also driven by aesthetic considerations? Initially probably not, but such considerations were eventually implicated. Never more so than from the 1970s until now, a period in which multiple viewpoints became a necessity for many artists.

What is unique about contemporary approaches to photography is how the photos are constructed by the photographer/artist and then received and understood by the person who looks. This may seem self-evident, but it is of course in tension with the elasticity of the photograph and its refusal to give up, in any easy way, what it actually is. This latter aspect continues to confound many contemporary theoreticians.

If the *Still Searching* blog is any indication, then there is ongoing and lively discussion and debate. Recalling Aveek Sen's view at the beginning of this presentation, here is another (somewhat paraphrased) perspective. In 2010, the English writer Julian Stallabrass noted in the *New Left Review* that a "democratic image culture" is still only democratic in terms of industrialized nations, but it seems more likely to be found on Flickr, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube than in a museum. However:

...in both realms, word and image making is constrained — in a museum by direct control, on the web by the frame and structure of the interface — and in both, the ideal of democratic freedom seems distant — for that would require the bringing together of complexity and accessibility, singular expression and cooperation, and power and mass participation...

The two realms might best be seen, in terms borrowed from [German philosopher Theodor] Adorno [writing in a letter to theorist Walter Benjamin] in 1936 as "torn halves of an integral freedom — to which however they do not add up."<sup>6</sup>

❖ 6 Julian Stallabrass, "Museum Photography and Museum Prose," *New Left Review* 65 (Sept/Oct 2010): 93-125.

Nonetheless, museums' embrace of photography is critical: the care, conservation, and dissemination of our various histories since the dawn of the medium, as well as research into modern and contemporary art, could not have taken place without this. I point to the simple truism repeated from Confucius to George Orwell and since: a culture that does not know its past cannot know its present or future. Photography is vital in making this possible.

Before moving on to the case study of the historical exhibition *The Photograph and Australia*, it is worth remembering that a little more than two hundred years ago in the West, around the time that Australia was colonized by the British, most people could only see their own face in still water. If you were lucky you could use a piece of glass or, if you were a bit better off, a mirror. If you had money you could have a silhouette or drawing made; the very rich could afford a portrait painting.

In the early years of photography portraits were still a rarity, but they soon became available to all. Now we can reproduce images of anything and everything to a degree where not being able to do so is almost unthinkable. This is a profound change in the way we see ourselves and the world. Photography has changed everything, including art, and we need to consider the implications at both an institutional and an individual level.

The second half of this presentation briefly encompasses aspects of my research toward the exhibition (and accompanying book) *The Photograph and Australia*.

My position was first and foremost that of curator. I attempted to make an exhibition from which a broad audience could draw knowledge and ideas, in addition to engaging in dialogue with historians from various disciplines, other curators, and artists. The idea was to encourage them to continue the work of researching our own histories and consider how these might fit into the world at large. Despite the scale of this project, I was only scratching the surface of the available archives.

The following points formed the backbone of the project:

- *The Photograph and Australia* was the first exhibition to assess Australian photographic history, drawing on collections nationwide, since 1988.
- It centered on the nineteenth century — due to the dynamic between the evolutions of Australian colonies (who did not federate into the nation known as "Australia" until 1901) and the photographic medium from the 1840s onwards — with a focus on how the colonies photographed themselves and presented these images to each other and globally at world fairs
- It considered how photography was harnessed to create the idea of an Australian nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- It looked at the evolution of mass media (*cartes de visite*, illustrated press, and so on) in the nineteenth century and at the digital revolution of today.
- It presented clusters of photographs identifying people, where and how they lived, what they did; it included personal as much as public and official material.

- It considered how our view of the world, ourselves, and each other has been changed by the advent of photography.
- It presented a contemporary perspective on the past.
- And it was organized by theme, not chronology.

A project called *The Photograph and Australia* was bound to raise great expectations. How well it succeeded in meeting these will take time to determine, maybe a decade or so. I was convinced that it would be disliked because of what was not covered — much, much more than could ever be included. To turn that around, I was offering opportunities for others to pick up the baton and drill into the themes, the works themselves, and the activities of the photographers. The very incompleteness of *The Photograph and Australia* was a necessity and a virtue.

In 2010, it was noted that there had not been a major survey in an art museum of the history of Australian photography that drew on collections nationwide since the exhibition and eponymous book *Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839-1988*. This exhibition was seen at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra in 1988 — the bicentenary of the European colonization of Australia.

I began my research by examining the photographs that were sent from Australia to the great world fairs in the second half of the nineteenth century, and by considering what the photographers and the Australian colonies were trying to do by participating in this way.

The first world fair was held in London's Crystal Palace in 1851. These fairs were cathedrals to modernity. They were designed to impress audiences with the magnificence of the made and natural worlds, and to shore up belief in the power of Empire. In 1862 the editors of the *Illustrated Weekly News*,<sup>❖7</sup> London wrote,

we have exhibitions of nearly all possible and impossible things under the sun — pigs, paintings, performing fleas, steam engines... yet as there is nothing more fertile than the imagination of exhibiting mankind, fresh addenda continue to drop in every day.

To the list of exhibits, one can add photographs (which were included in 1851, though none from Australia) and living people.

In 1855, photographs were sent from Australia to the Paris fair, most of them showing land and townscapes; local Victorian farmer John Hunter Kerr sent Aboriginal artifacts which he had also photographed. In 1862, back in London, a diverse group of photographs — including many of Aboriginal people — were displayed. Stereographs by Morton Allport in Tasmania were also sent that year, as were photographs of the finer parts of Melbourne.

❖7 *Illustrated Weekly News*, London, October 12, 1862, 2. Quoted in Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 13.



World fairs were celebrations of industrialization and modernity. They enabled personal and public collections to grow exponentially. Individuals and colonies, professionals and amateurs contributed to them, and emerging museums such as the Victoria and Albert in London and the Smithsonian in Washington acquired from them. They enabled sorting, categorizing, collecting, and further examination. In short, the middle of the nineteenth century saw the birth of the modern era and photography was, as it remains, an integral part of that era.

In order to encourage investment in and migration to the colony of Queensland, geologist and amateur photographer Richard Daintree assiduously exhibited painted photographs in London in the 1870s. Many of Daintree's works survive; they are revealing of race relations, as well as a number of matters to do with their making. Australian photography documents engagements with indigenous people and new landscapes, technological change and local adaptations, and the rise of sciences. There are few grand gestures, few caches of fine prints until the 1920s — and then only quite small caches. Styles and movements are imported, adopted, and until the 1950s this happens quite slowly. There is little institutional interest in the medium beyond its capacity as "handmaid" until the 1970s.

Photography's advent in the industrial revolution, and its integral role in the imperialist and modernist project, uniquely placed it to reflect and interpret the enormous changes in art, science, and society over the last 180-odd years. Simultaneously, photography is an amateur endeavor, accessible yet withholding, seductive yet banal, troubling in its ordinariness.

Just as we believe it is important to understand our written and spoken languages, so we must understand this visual language which has become so ubiquitous and influential. Importantly, the dynamic between the exercise of power and the eccentricities of the mundane in the medium allows cultures to invent and reinvent themselves, to make themselves visible in all their contradictions.

Mining collections — especially photography collections — is not an easy thing to do. Yet it is necessary work, especially if those outside or peripheral to the Euro-American cultural axis wish to achieve any visibility at all, whether internally or externally. We need overviews, otherwise the picture is patchy and archives are forgotten. In the twenty-first century, when repositories are becoming daily more and more immense, the task can be overwhelming. But without overviews and interpretations, as difficult and imperfect as they always are, as cultures we fail to know and understand ourselves and each other. We risk losing our many and various histories in the face of dominant social, cultural, and political forces.

In 2011, the photo historian Geoffrey Batchen reflected on the rash of books on the history of photography that purport to be national surveys:

...at the very moment when global capitalism, mass migrations, modern transportation systems, and electronic communications have combined to make a nation-state's boundaries entirely permeable, these histories are tenaciously reiterating the notion that a national essence can be identified and described.

He goes on:

...photography is...a differentiated field of practices in which both form and meaning can be disconcertingly local.<sup>❖8</sup>

❖8 Geoffrey Batchen, "Reviews," *Art Bulletin* 93, no. 4 (December 2011): 497-501.

I would add that these differences, rather than localism, should be celebrated.

The structure of *The Photograph and Australia* consisted of four overlapping themes which were spread through the nine rooms of the exhibition and the five chapters of the book. They are:

1. Aboriginal and settler relations
2. Exploration
3. Portraiture
4. Transmission (encompassing collecting, classifying, and distributing)

These themes clearly emerge from nineteenth-century photography. They are, in the Australian context, entwined with socio-political history more than they are with aesthetics and pictorial codes. There is no invention of the latter in Australia, but there is very much so with the former. This invention is aligned to the sense of wonder with which early photographers approached the medium.

Their appreciation of the information the photograph could impart led me to consider how the photograph invented modern Australia. This bold question is worth pursuing because of the sequence of events: Australian colonies were settled between 1788 and 1836; the ideas around photography were discussed by Australian intellectuals from around the 1830s. The first photograph was taken on Australian soil in 1841.

The first of the four themes — photography associated with Aboriginal and settler relations — is a critical one in Australia. Enshrined in the country's federal legal system as of 1901 is the notion of *terra nullius*: that the continent was empty when settled by Europeans, despite the fact that Aboriginal Australians had been living there for as long as sixty thousand years. The so-called White Australia policy, which was firmly in place from 1901 until the 1970s, had its roots in the 1850s. This policy discouraged non-Europeans

from emigrating to Australia; it goes hand in hand with *terra nullius* and both are racist.

However, in researching nineteenth-century Australian photography it became immediately and abundantly clear that the relationship between settlers and the indigenous played out in complex ways, as did the diversity of immigrants. Christian missions like Coranderrk in Victoria and Poonindie in South Australia came into being in the mid-nineteenth century in order to resettle and Christianize indigenous people; photographs show us their evolution, how viable they were, and then that they were destroyed.

What with all the stories to be told, I settled on two principles. One: because this exhibition was for an art museum, the most beautiful vintage photographic objects were included, with the caveat that the content had to be lively in some way. Two: I looked at narratives which tended to be constructive rather than wholly negative. This is in keeping with the contemporary indigenous view of representations; there was lengthy consultation with indigenous communities from the beginning of the project, and permissions were sought.

The process of reclamation of early visual material by indigenous communities is ongoing. I point to that process as an example of the power of the photograph. People are able to find out where they came from, who they are related to, and what happened to their forebears. For example, photographs by German immigrant J. W. Lindt dating from 1873 form a major body of work. They had wide international currency in the 1870s and 80s. A substantial group of these photographs now resides with the community descended from the subjects.

The second theme is exploration; it has three related parts. For example, photography's role in relation to the astronomical exploration of the southern hemisphere is as a contributor of crucial scientific information. Photography's role in relation to mining, which in Australia is an enormous historical and contemporary exercise, began with its use to document the physical composition of the land. Lastly, there is the photographic exploration of landscapes in general.

In pondering the question of whether photography invented modern Australia, I also began to ask, could modern science exist without photography?

Photographically mapping the southern skies was part of an important global endeavor, the *Carte du Ciel*; photographing local flora and fauna provided evidence of collectible exotica and enabled crazes such as pteridomania (fern fever); tourism as we know it grew out of the documentation of landscapes' geology for practical purposes such as mining, as well as the rise of the middle

classes. All these things happened throughout the industrialized world, but in Australia the people, landscapes, flora, and fauna were new and different. For both specialized and general audiences, photography excited studies and theories. Photographs could be cited as evidence. Photographs were more portable than the objects photographed. Photographs could be sorted, enabling expanding systems of classification.

Charles Bayliss was one of Australia's more remarkable nineteenth-century photographers. His practice encompassed portraiture, land, and townscapes, mammoth enterprises such as very large panoramas, and the documentation of scientific advances such as Australian inventor Lawrence Hargrave's flying machines.

The third and final genre is the most obvious in the history of photography regardless of place: portraiture. Although the first documented occasion of a daguerreotype being taken in Australia is 1841, the earliest extant daguerreotypes — George Goodman's photographs of Caroline Lawson and her children in Bathurst, New South Wales — date from 1845.

The first room of the exhibition included a wall of photographs of some of the photographers in the show. A number were self-portraits, or showed early photographers with their mobile studios and more recent photographers with their tools of trade. I thought it important to show that the photographs in the exhibition were not necessarily mirrors or windows, but things made by people who had various perspectives on what they were constructing and why.

The penultimate room in the exhibition had a 12-metre work by the Melbourne photographer and filmmaker Sue Ford titled *Self-portrait with camera 1960–2006*. This was her final work and consists of 47 photographs which piece together an active working life. Ford's work, from early on in her career, was not concerned with capturing a likeness; it had much more to do with the consideration of experiences, actions, and the effects of passing time.

From the outset of my research, the circulation of images was a key aspect of the project. This is fundamental to the understanding of the nature of the photograph from its inception, because it reveals how the drive toward reproducibility — whether of the world or of itself as a form — was built into the medium. In other words, it was never enough to simply capture an image, to excise a piece of the world; it was necessary to show this to others, and for that image to be examined, collected, categorized, circulated, and reproduced.

The final work in the transmission section was a meditation on the circulation of images in the twenty-first century by two Melbourne-based artists, Patrick Pound and Rowan McNaught. Pound collects vernacular photography from all over the world; McNaught is a very clever web designer, amongst other things. If you head to [compound-lens.com](http://compound-lens.com) on a computer, you can see the

software attempt to read Pound's collection of photographs which he has sorted, in this case, by the predominance of round or lens-shaped things. The work can also be viewed via a smartphone, where you see the completed computer "copy" plus a text written by the computer attempting to describe what it "sees" — much as we try to understand what any photograph represents.

To conclude, as I was undertaking a history of the photograph in Australia with all the undertones, and overtones, of colonial and national image making, I wanted to understand how photographs were used from the 1840s by those who saw their potential to inform, reflect, and invent.

In her 2012 essay *The Spam of the Earth*, the Berlin-based theorist and artist Hito Steyerl noted,

The image of the people as a nation, or culture, is precisely that: a compressed stereotype for ideological gain.<sup>❖9</sup>

❖9 Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation," *The Wretched of the Screen*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 160-175.

So how can we collectively approach such image making, and conceivably undo the stereotypes and reimagine a different set of visual exchanges? I would propose that researching, writing, and exhibiting the medium in all its aspects is a good way to start.

Early photography underpins the structure of *The Photograph and Australia*. It is inflected, inevitably, by a contemporary perspective. Despite my construction of a project which became weighted toward the early years of the medium, I was concerned not to recreate the past. The relatively small amounts of material from whatever period that I was able to bring forth into twenty-first-century light are points for consideration, and all are ripe for drilling into and expanding into large-scale exhibitions and books in their own right. Contemporary art appeared in seven of the nine rooms of the exhibition; in part, this is because many Australian artists have used the medium to bear witness or to reclaim Australia's past.

The twenty-first-century museum needs to assist twenty-first-century society in accessing its history and culture. In this presentation, I have shown some of the reasons why photography can tell us so much about our recent past and our contemporary society. I have also argued that photography must be respected by institutions and the public alike for its unique adaptability as an ever-evolving art object, record, memory aid, mirror, window, cultural artifact, and treasure trove of possibilities.

(English Editing: Alex Dudok de Wit [Art Translators Collective])