

Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?
Is it real?



Louis Daguerre, *Interior of a Cabinet of Curiosities* (1837)



Leonardo Patrizi, *Aerial view of a lake in Italy* (2017)

Photography emerged into a 19th-century world that was undergoing rapid transformation in almost every aspect, and as such the new medium answered a deep human need to see and explore this changing landscape in unprecedented detail. In January 1839 an announcement by the French Académie des sciences claimed that an image directly taken from life could now be fixed onto a metal plate. The inventor, Louis Daguerre (1787–1851), was both a businessman and a theatre designer. This perhaps helped shape the identity of early photography more than one might think. The drama and tension of Daguerre's new prototype photograph – a 'mirror' image that would soon be kept in a protective case lined with red velvet – illustrates some of photography's mixed identity. The daguerreotype had aspirations to both the realistic and the theatrical, as well as to the commercial. The 'mirror' can serve as a metaphor for reality, whereas the red velvet evokes theatre curtains, within which the beautiful drama would unfold.

One of Daguerre's earliest images is *Interior of a Cabinet of Curiosities* (left, top), which to our eyes might appear as if Photoshopped to look old, so familiar are we now with filter settings that immediately 'age' pictures. This may seem ironic, but at the same time it shows the importance of our frame of reference. The question arises: if manipulation is the first thing someone thinks of in connection to photography, what does that say about the value of the photograph as a reflection of reality? And what does a 'real photograph' even look like: Is it something you can hold? Is it something you can see on a screen and alter?

Daguerre's technique gave a unique image: it could only be copied by being re-photographed – something that already suggests photography's complicated relationship with reality. On the one hand, it is 'realistic': the daguerreotype didn't make up what was in front of the camera, as a mirror doesn't lie. Obviously, this goes for all imagery that is used in daily life, whether in courts of law or for medical purposes; anyone who has ever undergone an X-ray investigation or a full-body scan at airport security knows that there is no denying the 'realness'. Nonetheless, we can still ask ourselves in every single instance: under what circumstances are these images to be trusted as real?

One would assume that this picture (left, bottom) of a sunny landscape is a registration of what the photographer witnessed on a day out. This photograph, however, was not taken by a person with their camera looking down on an Italian lake, deciding when was the right moment to take this picture; it was taken by a drone. One could argue that this actually makes it easier to interpret the degree of reality in this image,

for the lack of human subjectivity makes it an example of 'true reality'. But it still doesn't look real. What this picture illustrates is that it is not just photography that is complicated, but the concepts of realism and reality, too. In addition, this belief in objective machine capture does not take into account any post production manipulation done by the photographer.

The process of manipulation starts as soon as we frame a person, a landscape, an object or a scene with our cameras: we choose a portrait or landscape format. What often follows is the addition of non-realistic filters, editing, altering or cropping. The binding principle of photography, however, remains its relationship to reality, especially when at question is documentary photography or a picture in the news media: we are convinced that 'it happened' – that the events they represent were real, that they actually took place.

Documentary and news imagery may seem the most realistic genres in photography, but their realism means nothing independently of how news media apply their ethical codes – if these are stipulated at all. The *New York Times* is known to work with a set of integrity guidelines, which, for instance, say that images in their pages 'must be genuine in every way'. Neither people nor objects may be added or removed from a scene, and adjustments to colour or greyscale should be limited to those minimally necessary for clear and accurate reproduction. If the slightest doubt is possible, captions should acknowledge the newspaper's intervention.

We know that if ten people were asked to take a photograph of the same scene, this would result in ten different photographs, with as many dissimilar points

of view. One can then ask: what are the differences between reality and witness and points of view?

The work of the French artist Sophie Calle (born 1953) reveals that reality, witness and point of view can actually blend into one other. Calle uses her artworks to pose questions about approaches to truth and to obscure the lines between fact and fiction. Her work *Suite Venitienne* (right), consisting of a set of 81 black-and-white photographs, came about in an unusual way. As Calle describes it: 'At the end of January, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of our conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice. I decided to follow him.'

Calle took a camera, put on a blonde wig as a disguise, and stalked him for several days, photographing him. The man is seen walking away from her down the Venice streets, going about his daily life. The appeal of this work lies in the use of documentary elements in combination with the artist's obsession and the sense of voyeurism that this evokes.

From Daguerre's age to ours, photography has undergone a transformation, not only technologically but conceptually. Initially described as a means of capturing or freezing 'real life', it has gradually taken on an ever more ambiguous, complicated and fraught character as our ability to modify and share images has exponentially increased. At its best, it is a subjective impression that is at the same time both fleeting and enduring – just like any good piece of drama.



Sophie Calle, from *Suite Venitienne* (1980)

Anna Atkins (1799–1871)
Polypodium phegopteris (1853)

Anna Atkins was a pioneer in photography. She was also the first person to produce a work with photographic illustrations: *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (1843). There is an elegance to Atkins's work. She has a forensic eye for the delicacy of plants, based on her experience of making detailed engravings and drawings of botanical specimens. The distinctive blue colour of the photographs is caused by the method of their production, a process known as cyanotype that was invented in 1842 by Sir John Herschel. Atkins knew both Herschel and William Henry Fox Talbot, who is commonly recognised as one of the first inventors of photographic processes. It is not surprising, then, that she would translate her interest and knowledge of illustrating botanical specimens into investigations using these processes.

A cyanotype is made by laying an object onto light-sensitive paper and placing it in the sun in order to create the image. Exposure time depends on how strong the sun is and how defined the maker wants the silhouette to be. The result is a negative image of the object. In a way, it could be said that this is the most realistic of all photographic methods, even though it does not involve a camera. It is literally a trace of the real, similar to that achieved when an object is laid on a scanner. But is it a photograph? Does a photograph need a camera in order to be defined as one? Many contemporary artists are returning to early photographic processes such as this in order to examine and explore the nature of the medium and the forms it takes outside of the stream of digital images we see every day.



Joan Fontcuberta (born 1955)
and Pere Formiguera (1952–2013)
Fauna (1985–1989)

Created by conceptual artists Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, *Fauna* was conceived as a hoax book and exhibition. It uses the language of an objective document and turns it on its head. Photography has traditionally been used to illustrate and provide evidence for written points and observations in science and botany, and has a long tradition of being used by explorers and ethnographers when documenting foreign lands and people. *Fauna* aims to show that photographs must be questioned even when they are presented in a format such as an exhibition or book, which we typically understand as truthful. By exploring the fine lines between fiction and reality and what is considered neutral, true and objective, the book purports to tell the story of the German zoologist Peter Ameisenhaufen, who mysteriously disappeared in 1955. Effectively, the book masquerades as his notebook featuring field studies, notes, photographs and X-rays.

The meticulous, scientific approach taken by both exhibition and book are superficially convincing. However, the viewer/reader quickly realises that the creatures and plants that Ameisenhaufen is shown as discovering are all fantastical. They include the carefully catalogued *Cercopithecus Icarocornu*, shown here, which is similar in appearance to a small monkey but with a unicorn's horn and wings. The questions the artists ask of photography encourage the reader to do the same – questions such as 'How do I know this is real?' and 'What does a photograph prove?' As such, *Fauna* acts as a useful reminder that the authority of photographs – their claim to the status of fact – must always be interrogated.

Cercopithecus Icarocornu

Cercopithecus Icarocornu 26. 7. 1954 - 7. 1.
Hauptort: Chavala Stamm: Vestibala Klass.: Mammalia

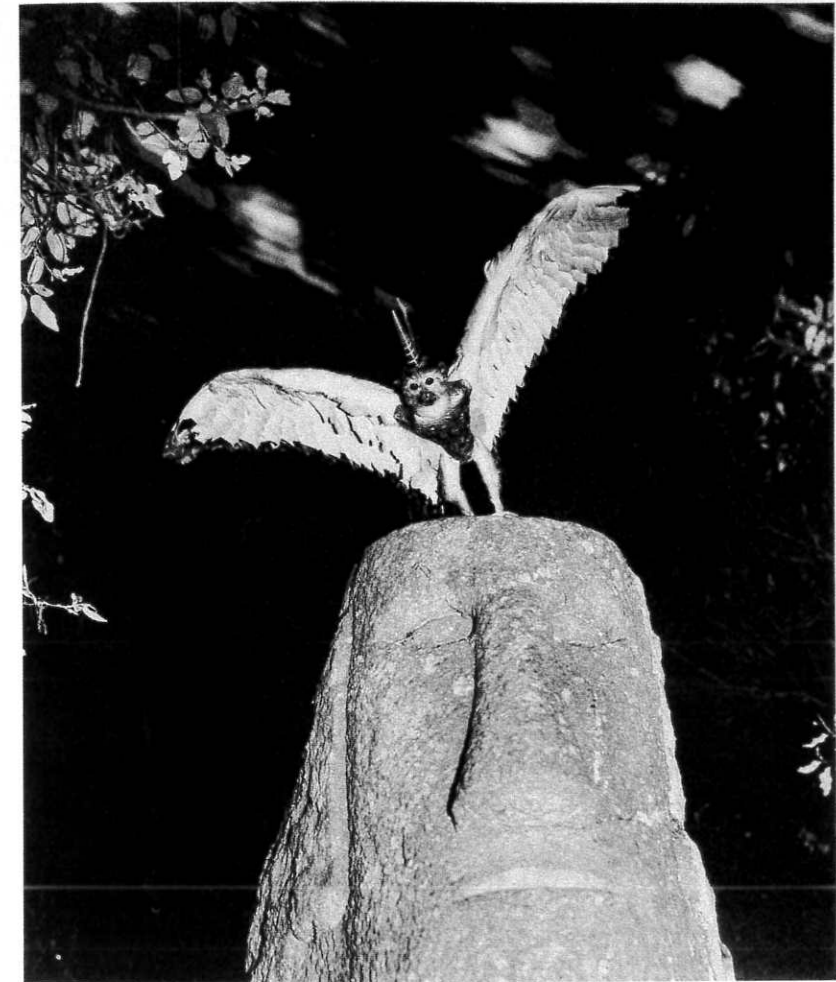
Entdeckungsort: Im Amazonaswald (Brasilien) mit Hilfe des bedauerten Anthropologen Dr. Edson Meliako entdeckt, der ihn während eines Studienaufenthaltes bei den Nygala-Indianern entdeckte. Ich fuhr nach Brasilien und lebte in Begleitung von Dr. Meliako, der von den Indianern als Heiliger angesehen wird, und meinem Schüler Hans 32 Tage lang bei den Nygala-Indianern, um das seltsame Verhalten dieses außerordentlichen Tieres zu beobachten.

Beobachtungszeitraum: 28. Februar bis 13. März 1954.

Allgemeine Merkmale und Morphologie: Es handelt sich um einen langschwänzigen Affen mit großen Flügeln, die er ihm schenken sich mit Leichtigkeit in die Luft zu schwingen. Seine Morphologie ist augenscheinlich die eines Säugtiers und kennzeichnend für einen Affen. Die ständige Beobachtung, die von mir selten der Wilden ausgesetzt waren, erlaubte keinerlei nähere Untersuchung der Tiere. Nach meinen Beobachtungen ist er ein Allesfresser, der sich unterschiedlich von Insekten, Früchten oder kleinen Tieren ernährt, die er mit seinem langen starken Horn im Flug fängt. Er wäre der 6. Unterordnung der Neuen Zoologie zuzuordnen.

Gewohnheiten: Der *Cercopithecus Icarocornu* ist das heilige Tier der Nygala-Indians, für sie ist die Reinwaschung von Agrari (der, der vom Himmel kam) darstellt. Die weiblichen Tiere gebären im Innern einer großen Hütte im Dorfzentrum, die nur der Medizinmann betreten darf. Die Nachkommen sterben schon in dieser Hütte, bis sie ihr gesondertes Flugvermögen entwickelt haben. Dieses Moment wird mit einem großen Fest gefeiert, in dessen Verlauf der *Cercopithecus* einer Operation unterzogen wird, bei der ihm die Haut des Amazonas-Silberfisches eingepflanzt wird, die die ganze Brust und den Rücken bedeckt wird. Dann wird das Tier freigelassen, entspannt sich aber nie sehr weit von der Siedlung und beteiligt sich an allen heiligen Festen der Nygala-Indians. Bei diesen Gelegenheiten wird ihm ein alkoholhaltiges Getränk gepofft, das er gerne trinkt, um dann in einem Vollrausch zu fallen, bei dem er mit dem Flügeln so wild an zu schlagen beginnt, dass er sich in die Luft erhebt, mit starkem Körper und wie ein Besessener singend. Wegen seiner Größe singt er in tiefen Tönen und Stimmstärke, die eine Art tiefen Gesangs, die die Eingeborenen, gleichsam als würden sie sie verstehen, auf sich folgen. Der Geschlechtsakt findet im Innern der Hütte statt, die auch von dem *Cercopithecus* aufgesucht wird, wenn er den nahen Tod spürt.

Cercopithecus Icarocornu



Moment of the magic song over the totem of sacrifices
Beim magischen Gesang über dem Opfer-Totem



Andreas Gursky (born 1955)
99 Cent (1999)

A good advertising image can suggest a lifestyle, tapping into notions of aspiration and desire. Somewhat perversely, Andreas Gursky turns this on its head by using the seductive tools so readily used by advertising to critique consumerism. *99 Cent* appears to depict the kind of store familiar to high streets around the world. We know that places like this exist, and the photograph looks convincing. We have no reason to doubt it. Gursky, however, does not take 'straight' photographs, but digitally stitches his photographs together from several slightly different views, to create a result that looks real – or hyperreal. On closer inspection, we can see that the goods here are repeated, the patterns are too uniform, and the fakery of the image is revealed.

However, is 'fake' the right word here? Does it in some way devalue the photograph to know that this is not a real 99-cent store, but one created in the artist's mind? When Gursky's photographs were first shown, many of the reviewers expressed their disappointment in the manipulation – wanting the images to be 'real' and feeling cheated somehow that they were not.

The scale of this photograph is very large – it is made for museum walls and the homes of collectors who have space for such an object. By taking the cheapest of goods and making them into art, there is at the heart of this piece a comment on high art versus consumerism. This is a picture with conceptual rigour, but this could easily be overlooked in the spontaneous, superficial encounters we usually have with images, especially where these relate to advertising and consumerism. High and low, art and advertising, realness and fakery, consumerism and collecting: all exist side by side in this photograph, which was once the most expensive ever sold.

Unknown photographer
Neuschwanstein Castle (c.1890)

This photo was taken shortly after the opening of Neuschwanstein Castle to the public. The castle, commissioned by King Ludwig II of Bavaria, was conceived as an imitation and homage to medieval castles, by way of Wagnerian romanticism, and it has always been closely associated with fantasy. Not only has it appeared in many famous films such as *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) and *The Great Escape* (1963), but it was also the model for the Sleeping Beauty Castle (1955) in Disneyland. We are so familiar with the silhouette of the Disney castle as it appears before every film made by the company, with fireworks arcing over the turrets, that to see a photograph of the real castle on which it was based seems somehow unbelievable, as if, out of the two of them, this is the made-up castle.

The use of colour in the Photochrom print (a colour photographic lithograph used to make postcards) makes it seem all the more like something out of a fairy tale. We are accustomed to seeing black-and-white pictures from this time, and they somehow feel more authentic, more real, than this one. But isn't colour photography inherently more realistic?

In a time when digitally manipulated images and fake images in the news and on social media timelines are rife, this photograph seems hard to believe – it seems that the castle (which was based on draft sketches by a stage designer) has been artificially inserted into the scene. Our response is probably not too dissimilar to the feelings of the Bavarian people in the 1880s, who saw the folly of their king unfold in this extraordinary Romanesque Revival palace.



17162. P. Z. - OBER - BAYERN. NEUSCHWANSTEIN.

Gustave Le Gray (1820–1884)
The Great Wave, Sète (1857)

If we look carefully at this seascape, it is obvious that it has been heavily manipulated. Thanks to the filters we can apply in photo apps such as Instagram we are now familiar with vignetting – a technique which darkens the outside edges of a photograph and highlights the middle. Here it looks as though a vignette has been applied for dramatic and expressive effect. But does that make the picture any less realistic? A subjective or artistic touch is not necessarily the opposite of reality, as it attempts to capture an emotional response, which is all part of the experience of viewing. Is it, in fact, more realistic for a picture to try to evoke the emotional excitement that watching the sea can provoke?

Gustave Le Gray was trained as a painter and turned to photography around 1847, quickly establishing himself as a master of the new art. When we examine the picture, it becomes apparent that two negatives have been spliced together to make this picture, so that the clouds meet the horizon in the same way that an eye would view the scene – as opposed to the camera that would flatten it out. It could be argued, therefore, that this picture is a more truthful and realistic representation of how the eye actually views a horizon. Isn't a straight photograph always unrealistic compared with how we really experience a view?

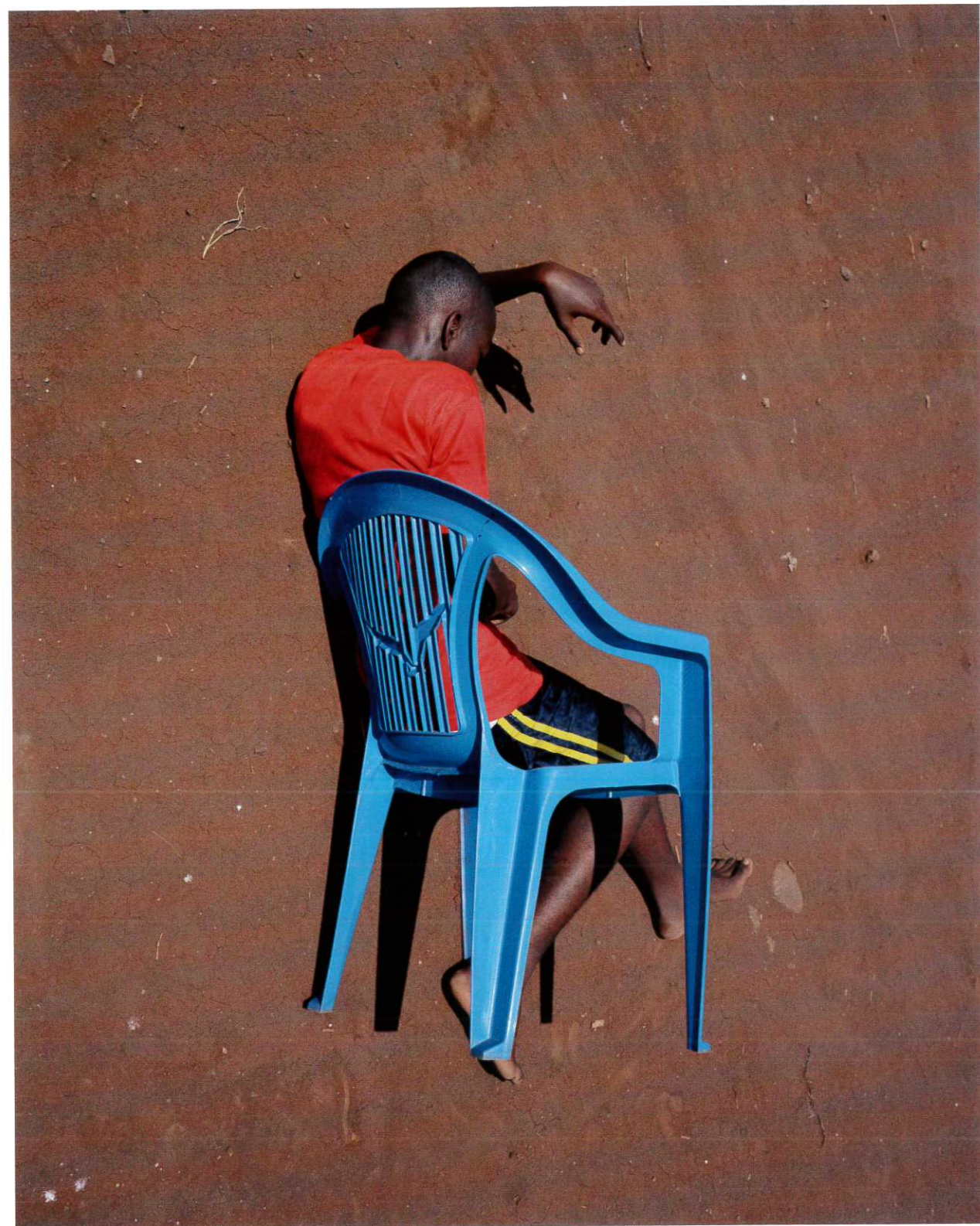




Robert Capa (1913–1954)
The Falling Soldier (1936)

This is probably one of the most written-about images in the history of photography, its authenticity puzzled over by scholars, curators, photographers and historians. Extraordinary lengths have been taken to prove or disprove that it really represents what the photographer claimed (there have been exhibitions, books and a TV programme dedicated to the subject). Robert Capa himself stated that it shows the moment a soldier from the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth during the Spanish Civil War (1936–9) was shot and killed in the Battle of Cerro Muriano. However, the identity of the man and the location have repeatedly been brought into question. Even the authorship of Capa himself is unclear as no negative of this actual shot survives. Many believe that it was staged (something that sometimes happens in conflict photography, as it is not always easy for photographers to get close to the action) while others will swear by its authenticity.

In many ways, it is this determination to find out whether this photograph is 'real' or not that is of more interest than what is actually represented. Does it matter which version is true? Owing to its lack of clarity, it becomes a strange object – not quite one thing or the other. It might be a man being shot in the midst of battle or it might be staged. This is an unusual position for a documentary photograph and illustrates that reality is perhaps not the most important issue when making a statement about the role of representation in warfare.



Viviane Sassen (born 1972)
Parasomnia (2010)

The Dutch artist Viviane Sassen grew up in Kenya and returned with her camera as an adult to see how her childhood memories compared to the reality she saw as an adult and an outsider. From this, she created her series *Parasomnia* (also the title of the photograph shown here, from the same series). Trained as a fashion designer and a photographer, Sassen does not depict the stereotypical poverty of Africa, but she lets ordinary people and their surroundings become part of her colourful, captivating yet alienating compositions.

Her images are mostly staged: to Sassen, photography involves a long preliminary process of taking notes, sketching and getting to know her models. The human body is often central, adopting sometimes seemingly impossible poses, camouflage elements, or combined confusingly with another. The body is used as a graphic component within the image, while the face is usually either obscured or turned away. Despite the meticulous preparation, there is ample space for the haphazard, in the light and shadow, as though Sassen has left a space for the uncontrolled world to make its contribution.

Sassen wants to demonstrate that it is impossible to capture the identity of a person or place in one image, and to show the limitations of the medium of photography. Inadvertently, however, she does quite the opposite: her work does not simply show reality, ambiguity, the ordinary, an interpretation, or a mystery; but instead everything at once, in a poetic, otherworldly vision of a certain place. Her view of Africa is as at home in fashion magazines as it is on museum walls. More importantly, perhaps, her images penetrate into the mind of the viewer, inviting them to project and create their own narrative as they seek to enter the world portrayed, or created, by Sassen's photography.