EMBRACING COMPLEXITY AND UNCERTAINTY
PHMUSEUM ONLINE EXHIBITION CURATED BY HEIDI ROMANO

AISHWARYA ARUMB AKKAM
ARUNA CANEVASCINI
JOHN FEELY
MATTHEW GENITEMPO
SHUWEI LUI
RAYMOND MEEKS
FRANCESCO MERLINI
AARON SCHUMAN
SARAH PANELL
WOUTER VAN DER VOORDE
YORGOS YATROMANOLAKIS
TANIA FRANCO KLEIN

PICTURE © MATTHEW GENITEMPO
At one time or another, we have all experienced uncertainty. A moment where we question everything - our ideas, projects and dreams.

For this online exhibition, the work of the participating artists is placed into an open-ended dialogue, by proposing two questions to each photographer, I am curious to find out how each artist deals with these moments.

Heidi Romano

This PDF serves as a compendium for Embracing Complexity and Uncertainty
PHmuseum Online Exhibition, curated by Heidi Romano. Visit the online show at the following link: phmuseum.com/exhibition
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

I made the work Ahp during the 12th Angkor Photo Festival workshops at Siem Reap, Cambodia. Perhaps it was because of my obsession with mythologies and oral histories. The character of Ahp revealed itself to me, during research and recce, and through interaction with the people at Siem Reap and Bakong. I cannot say finding the idea was a clear, linear process. It was about intersections between things I was thinking about, and my reaction to the place I found myself in, and vice versa.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

I’m aware it’s uncertainty that has led to discoveries, growth and simply even better photographs in my practice. However, I’m still learning to trust and welcome it wholly. What I’m trying (not always successfully) to do is create an environment, physically and psychologically, that’s conducive to chance. I have a long way to go and hope to keep working towards that. The biggest complexity while working on a story like Ahp is the question of re-presentation. As an outsider in this situation, there are questions I have to constantly ask myself. I cannot say for sure, but an approach that’s rather slow, and time, is perhaps important for a work like this.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

When I was one year old I moved with my family to the south of Switzerland, in a small mountain town with a somewhat narrow mentality. People weren’t used to dealing with foreigners; moreover, my mother cut a quite unusual figure because she was also an artist, and our house has always been a peculiar and bizarre place for strangers.

Whenever I’d visit my friends as a child, I felt their houses were cold and impersonal; and when anyone would come into our house, I felt vulnerable—as if they could discover my deepest secrets. I didn’t like that feeling; I wanted to be like everyone else. In a way, the origins of Villa Argentina are in that sense of being different, which I tried to explore again in the photographs of this series. So Villa Argentina was inspired by my own intimate and personal story, which allowed me to touch on other themes like domestic life, femininity and some aspects involved with migration.

I’m generally very influenced by Dutch painters and photographers; but for this project in particular I studied and researched the visual representation of the Eastern world, and focused on the representation of the Eastern woman in 19th century Western paintings, and in Edward Said’s writings on Orientalism. In one of my photographs, ‘Odalisque with a Pot’, I wanted to question such sexist and stereotyped view of Eastern women: the image shows my mother with her head inside a pot, an item typically associated with housework. My goal with this picture is to show how women have been mostly depicted in the history of art by male artists who have always represented them as idealized creatures, and how society has preconceived ideas on what role women should have, ignoring entirely their individual identities.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

When uncertainty arrives in my creative process, I almost always react with a negative feeling. As I get older, I understand that this state of mind allows me to go deeper and better define my ideas.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

My projects develop from two different places. They either come from a personal starting point, where they are initiated by decisions I make more in my life than in photography, or they come from observing society and curiosity develops from here.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

The short answer is by trying to being honest with myself about it. Embracing uncertainty is opening up to things as they actually are so I try to work in an open-ended, ‘don’t know’ kind of way. My intention is to raise questions and not give answers that are absolute. My projects are subjective and show fragments that suggest rather than describing. I work in a very observational way so I spend a lot of time watching, responding and then reviewing. I never know what the project is about when I begin, I just know why I felt it was important for me to choose to be there in that spot. Everything seems complex at the beginning, yet after several rounds of this process, something starts to stand out. From there I try to develop a language that makes this thing primary in the images.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

Jasper sort of found me. I wasn’t actively out looking to make pictures about running away. It wasn’t at all conscious at first. The initial objective for visits to The Ozarks began as experiments. I wanted to break habits and test new ways of making pictures. After multiple trips and hundreds of photographs, a pattern emerged. There were numerous pictures of dense forests, hermetic homesteads, cluttered interiors, and calloused solitary men. Once I recognised this structure, I could really dig in and begin.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

It’s essential now. I used to try and think my way into photographs and would try to conceptualise pictures before the scenes would unfold in front of me. It was a really inefficient and backward way to make pictures. The unpredictable element is crucial.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

For this one, I didn’t find ideas. I was just living life and got trapped in it. This is one of the projects that I only realised I was doing when I was about to finish.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

During this project, I was desperately jumping on uncertainties, like each of them was a gate to another world; not to escape but to explore more possibilities. But this only happens when you’re fearless from the dangers, which are the moments that you’re truly alive.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

I do everything to avoid forming ideas for a project and even try not to think in terms of projects, as in a contained body of work. More often, questions or an intrinsic interest in a place begin forming and I make pictures to satisfy curiosity or gain some understanding about why I feel so compelled to photograph a place or subject. So, in this sense, ideas find me and almost exclusively when I'm not looking. I can't say that the work I made at Furlong will continue as an ongoing interest but I've always been surprised at how bodies of work I've made in the past feed into new work and expand on themes I'd visited previously.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

Complexity comes mostly from working within a widely used medium with many ubiquitous tendencies - routine modes of picture-making and standards for presenting pictures in either book form or in an exhibition space. However, the formal means for presenting pictures in a book or picture frame remain an asset - a predefined space where the image alone either performs or it doesn't. Uncertainty is an asset and an ally. Ultimately, I want to be surprised, to have discovery and expand in ways of seeing and interpreting a subject and the surroundings. I'm having the most fun when I set aside what I know for an adventure into unknown territory.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

Usually, the ideas for my projects can originate from anything; it can be a picture or a short article seen in a magazine or online. Sometimes ideas come from reading a book, sometimes it can be the result of a memory that floats in my mind that at a certain point becomes a vision; a vision that marks the beginning of a story I need to narrate.

With Valparaiso, it has been quite different. Since I started taking pictures seriously, I felt the need to narrate this valley where I was born and where I’ve spent a lot of time since I was a child, even if I grew up in a big city like Milan. I’ve photographed this place for many years, without any real ideas or scheme but I’ve never been satisfied with what I was doing. I think the real “idea” that stands at the base of this project arrived in 2016 when I decided to put aside any kind of documentary approach with the awareness that I’ve never been interested in the beauty of natural scenery or in the objective reality of this place. So, I started to create a world of my own with a subjective reality and a personal visual alphabet.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACING COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

Uncertainty is part of the photographic practice and it appears in every stage of it: before, during, and after the shooting stage, which is just one of the components that, especially during these times, defines and differentiates being a photographer from just being a person that takes pictures.

Uncertainty hits me when, while starting to think about a new project, I question myself about the power that the story would reach and about the objective value that the final result could achieve. Photography is a very personal practice but I believe that even in the most personal stories we have to always look for a result that can be understood, at least on an emotional level, to everyone and not only to the “authorised personnel”. Is this one the story I want to tell? Will this story have a universal echo? Will my photographic work be able to narrate this story in an incisive way?

I’m not the kind of photographer who continues to use the same language for each one of my projects; I think that a photographer should have the humility and the curiosity to question themselves about which photographic language would be the best one in order to intensify their story and

for sure this is an element that amplifies the margin of error and creates uncertainty. Every story deserves a proper language but did I chose the correct one for the story I want to narrate? Will the language I decided to use raise the story or will it be just pure decoration, the weak result of an aesthetical effort?

The same uncertainty hits me after shooting, while editing, when I find myself in front of hundreds of pictures that I’ve taken and I have to choose the correct pieces of my puzzle in order to not frustrate all the work I’ve done before. It’s easy to exclude the bad pictures and the repeats but it’s much harder when the number of images decreases and you start to exclude the pictures you like but that are not the ones that you think will have the right impact on the story and on the atmosphere you want to achieve with your work.

Complexity is always present in my work and it’s something that I’m learning to deal with over the years. More and more complexity is present in the photo industry, and particularly recently it is one of the elements that sustains the gap between amateurs and professionals. Anyway, we must not forget that the beauty and the power of photography reside in its immediacy and so, I always try to find a balance between complexity and simplicity. I think the most powerful emotions are often located in the simplest pictures and in the stories that, even when very complex, are composed of simple elements that everyone can relate to, glorifying the universal value of the photographic medium.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

This project started in the summer of 2014, when I was visiting my parents for a few days in Amherst, Massachusetts. One morning, I was flipping through their local, weekly newspaper – the Amherst Bulletin – and came across a page with the heading “Police Reports”. I started reading through them, and amongst the more generic and banal activities reported – fender benders, minor acts of vandalism, loud parties, and so on – I discovered several more unique, seemingly surreal and somewhat absurd reports of events (or non-events) that genuinely made me laugh out loud. For example, some of the first ones I found read:

“ANIMAL COMPLAINTS: 6:30 p.m. – Police took a report that four dogs were sitting on top of a vehicle parked on Pray Street. Police were unable to find the dog or vehicle.”

—or-

“SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY: 1:13 p.m. – Police were unable to find a man who was reported punching a tree outside the downtown bars.”

They just seemed so ridiculous, and totally unworthy of media (or police) attention. And yet there they were on the printed page, being reported in this incredibly straight, deadpan, monotone style that seemed to imbue them with a real sense of authority, sincerity, seriousness, importance and newsworthiness – I thought they were amazing. Additionally, I was enamored with the way in which each report was written – a short, matter-of-fact sentence or two, without a hint of irony or subjectivity, which somehow managed to encapsulate both the mind-numbing ordinariness of the place whilst also conveying its extraordinariness in the most dead-pan of ways. I found them somewhat poetic in a very spare and interesting kind of way, like something by William Carlos Williams, or a short story by Lydia Davis.

My dad was sitting in the living room with me, so I started to read some of them out loud, and he starting laughing as well – we spent about an hour doing this. After getting through that week’s page, I dug around their house finding back-issues of the same newspaper from previous weeks, and discovered that each week’s paper seemed to contain one or two gems when it came to the police reports. Reading through them, I realised that the best ones seemed to create a kind of mental-image in my mind’s eye – that they could be used as a starting point for further exploration. And so I decided to experiment with various ways to present found texts and their own photographs to one another. I ended up looking at things like:

- Lewis Hine’s work from Ellis Island, in which he originally combined his photographs with succinctly written texts and quotes from poetry - Weegee’s Naked City, which incorporates tabloid-like captions and his own written accounts of events - Bill Owens’s Suburbia, which pairs his photographs with short, edited quotes that Owens collected from his subjects - Alec Soth and Brad Zellar’s LBM Dispatches, in which Soth and Zellar adopt the roles of newspaper photographer and reporter while traveling through small towns across the USA - and much more.

And then finally, what really set me on fire in terms of inspiration was a visit to the Paul Strand retrospective that opened at the V&A in the spring of 2019. In it, there was a vitrine that contained Time in New England – a collaboration between Strand and the writer and curator, Nancy Newhall, made between 1945-1950.

In 1945, Strand and Newhall set out to make a book about New England, whereby over the next five years “Strand departed into New England with his cameras”, and “[Newhall] began ransacking libraries” in search of texts that reflected the “New England spirit”. Every few months they would meet, Strand would show Newhall his photographs, Newhall would show Strand the texts she’d found, and they’d try to find connection that would help bring the two elements together. The texts Newhall found were incredibly varied and broadly sourced – they included letters written by early colonial settlers, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Susan B. Anthony, folk tales and sea shanties, direct witness accounts of the Salem witch trials, the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and Henry David Thoreau, diary entries by Revolutionary soldiers and child millworkers, quotes from Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, poems by Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson, and much more – even a diary entry by the minister and celebrated abolitionist, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, which begins: “May 19, 1866 – To Amherst to the funeral of that rare and strange creature, Emily Dickinson.”
Anyway, the ways in which Strand and Newhall cleverly interwove and built subtle relationships between his quite formal, direct and "straight"-laced photographs and this amazingly diverse collection of texts sourced by Newhall seemed to provide a lot of answers for me going forward, both in terms of how I thought about making photographs in and around Amherst, and how I might begin to involve, connect and bounce them off the police reports.

Looking at Time in New England, I realised that if I could go back to Amherst, but pull from the slightly differing early-20thC. "straight" approaches, aesthetics and philosophies of both Strand and Evans – somehow drawing from both the "formal" eye of Strand and the "anti-art-photographic" directness of Evans within my own photographs – and then could find a way to loosely fold in these very deadpan and contemporary police reports with care and consideration (as Newhall did with her found texts) so as to create newfound relationships and meanings, I might be onto something here. So in the summer of 2016, when I found myself back at my parents' house again, I took my camera with me and felt that I finally had a real sense of focus, intention and purpose in terms making new photographs.

Lastly, Emily Dickinson’s poem — Tell all the Truth but tell it slant — has served as an important inspiration for the project:

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Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —
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The idea of the ‘truth’ being something that is too ‘bright’ and ‘dazzling’ to be told straight fascinates me as a photographer. Also, stylistically, Dickinson’s famous use of ‘slant rhyme’ appealed to me, particularly for this project. I realized that I might not necessarily need a photograph things that were directly or very literally related to the reports, and in fact, it might be better to approach the photographic aspect of this project from a ‘slant’ angle. As the book synopsis on the MACK website reads:

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...In SLANT, the relationship that has been constructed between photography and text takes its inspiration from a poetic scheme called ‘slant rhyme’, notably espoused by the 19th-century poet Emily Dickinson, who also happened to live and write in Amherst. In such a rhyming scheme, “there is a close but not exact correspondence of sounds, often using assonance or consonance; generally it is used in poetry to give variations and an inharmonious feeling.” Appropriating this literary device, SLANT serves as a wider reflection upon something strange, surreal, dissonant and increasingly sinister stirring beneath the surface of the contemporary American landscape, experience, and psyche.
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**HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?**

In SLANT, I am exploring and playing off the role of the newspaper reporter – and the authoritative, ‘objective’, ‘truth-telling’ voice of journalism – but trying to loosen it up by introducing some ambiguity, and focusing on what might be considered peripheral non-events rather than important news stories. Many of the police reports I include in the book compellingly, and with very specific detail in terms of time and place, tell the story of nothing really happening — “6:32 p.m. – A man described as having a ‘wild hairdo’ on a West Street porch was not located by police”; “6:36 a.m. - Strange sounds coming from the woods near Mill Valley Estates were determined to be trees creaking due to the cold temperatures” – and similarly the photographs, which are taken in a “straight” and rather matter-of-fact manner and feature very ordinary, everyday places and peripheral things, are seen in a new, strangely compelling and potentially meaningful light when considered alongside these kinds of quasi-news stories, or as quasi-journalism.

I’ve always loved the story of William Eggleston’s Election Eve. Just before the 1976 election, Eggleston took an assignment from Rolling Stone magazine to photograph Jimmy Carter and his family in Carter’s very small hometown of Plains, Georgia. But when he arrived, Carter was out of town and on the campaign trail, so Eggleston just wandered around the outskirts of the town, photographing the surrounding fields, fences, mailboxes, barns, diners, gas stations, sidewalks, cemeteries, graffiti, flora, fauna and foliage. Of course, Rolling Stone never ran the pictures as there was absolutely nothing newsworthy or directly informative about them, but it became such a beautiful body of work that hums with the undertones of that particular time in history, that particular election, and what Carter represented and stood for in the context of the American cultural landscape. Perhaps SLANT – which was photographed between 2016-18, on trips to Amherst before, during and after the 2016 elections – takes a leaf out of Eggleston’s book in this regard.

Referring back to Dickinson’s poem, “Truth” is often misunderstood as being something that’s clear, simple, singular, objective, and straightforward, yet it’s a human construct that’s as malleable, ambiguous, and subjective as any other human concept. In both historical and contemporary photographic discourse—and particularly within what’s often referred to as “documentary” photography—the confusion over what truth is has consistently been problematic. Photographs (particularly those understood to be “documentary”) are often assumed to be clear, objective, direct, and straight translations of truth or reality. Yet time and time again, photographers — and in particular, “documentary” photographers — have asserted that photography is a subjective medium, and that photographs are often much more ambiguous, multi-dimensional, and multi-layered than they first appear. I love the complexity of presenting information from a perspective that’s both direct and ambiguous, and therefore open to interpretation.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

When I was 18, a few years before my focus shifted to photography, in my first year of university I enrolled in a class that focused on 20th century Middle Eastern history and politics. During that semester, a large focus of the subject was on Iran and the immense social and political impact of the 1979 revolution. The events I studied were both fascinating and unbelievable, and since 2007 I knew I would one day travel there. I can’t say why in particular Iran piqued my interest but when I was in the United States studying in 2011 I met some Iranians who were living in California and when I told them I would love to visit their home country, they encouraged me to go, despite their difficult situations in not being able to return themselves. After spending a year or so researching and preparing for my first trip, I finally travelled there in September/October 2016 and spent a month travelling around to a number of cities and provinces. I was motivated by common misconceptions about Iran in western dialogue and the constant question of safety when it comes to tourism. It’s a country full of contradictions and surprises and I find it such an inspiring place to make work.

The images from Tabriz to Shiraz are reflections that depict the main scenes and experiences that affected me during my initial visits to Iran and those moments that stood out as uniquely Iranian. In a way, this project is the first chapter of my Iranian based work, as I now shift my focus to a longer-term project which explores the cultural importance and relevance of hospitality in modern Iranian society.

I’m of course influenced by a wide range of contemporary documentary approaches to photography and the importance of colour and form in my work is central to my approach to landscape and portraiture in particular.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

There is a great deal of uncertainty within my practice and approach to photography and I think I really embrace it. I work alone, in that I travel alone and photograph on my own and generally I’m not working with a writer or fixer. I leave a lot of things up to chance and although I do a great deal of research into my subjects, I don’t create contrived images or plan out shooting times. I think my most successful photographs are made spontaneously and that is something I love about photography. The work from Iran is a product of my time spent getting to know my subjects and meeting and talking to people. I shoot on a whim and most of the time I am sitting down enjoying a meal with people or wandering around a particular neighbourhood. In this sense, I guess uncertainty works well for me and it’s the same with my current projects I’m working on in Europe.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

The idea for this series was the disjointed sense of belonging I have experienced since living in Australia as someone born in Belgium. Both places are very much my home. I drew parallels between the beloved house of my grandparents in Belgium and the nearby mountain range in Canberra where I currently reside with my family. After my grandfather passed away in 2015 I was driven to document, in detail, the house he lived in with my grandmother. My grandfather was an architect and designed this house for his large family (seven children). As a child, I loved this enormous house full of secrets and seemingly endless rooms. The vastness of nature I experience here in Australia gives me a similar comfort.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

Uncertainty is part of the dance. Often I balance on the verge of crippling self-doubt and productiveness as an artist. The periods of introspection and questioning one’s practice serve to continuously re-invent the way I perceive reality and produce images. You could compare this drive to The Beeldenstorm in Dutch, roughly translatable to “statue storm” a term used for outbreaks of the destruction of religious images that occurred in Europe in the 16th century. I aim to destroy my own biases and patterns I get stuck in.

Complexity is inevitable when the world is your playing field, I do not aim to simplify the theatre that is presented to me. When using, for example, a view camera or a medium format digital camera the amount of gathered data present in the negative or digital file is an incredibly complex feast of information. The amalgam of the totality of the images I have produced and will produce reflects the complexity of everything that surrounds us.
YORGOS YATROMANOLAKIS -
THE SPLITTING OF THE CHRYSLIS & THE
SLOW UNFOLDING OF THE WINGS
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT? HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

This photography project began instinctively after my unforeseen return to my family home. At the time, I was not very optimistic about the way my life was evolving – I was passing through a dark phase. I think the idea of metamorphosis was born through observation and my identification with nature. By using photography during these walks, I was able to subconsciously – almost psychoanalytically – articulate my feelings through visual images. But there were many mysterious elements in my work which, to a certain extent, I felt the need to ponder. It was not really about placing my work in a reasonable context; it was more about better understanding who I am, and how I am developing within the work. After some time and after the body of the project had started to form, I began to research in various disciplines, from biology and mythology to analytical psychology and anthropology, which helped me more in the process of editing and structuring the narrative of the book.
WHERE DID YOU FIND IDEAS FOR YOUR PROJECT?

I usually inspire myself with the psychological states of my everyday life and the ideas that permeate those states in contemporary societies. I then like to complement my own thoughts with social theories that apply to each topic. For Proceed To Route, it came slightly differently than the rest of my work but nonetheless was inspired in my current status. I have been travelling non-stop for the past four years and one day I remember was driving and my google maps got stuck and couldn't stop repeating “Proceed to the route”. I found it interesting how in current times we have everything so established we don’t give ourselves a chance to explore different paths, literally and metaphorically, and to walk our life without following what we think we are supposed to do or be. So I decided to explore this idea and go deeper into this metaphor and to connect it to an emotional state.

HOW DO YOU EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AND/OR HOW DO YOU FACE COMPLEXITY IN YOUR PRACTICE?

I think the uncertainty has become a very big fuel for my practice and a way for me to create work. Being in a state of uncertainty leaves more doors open and allows me to embrace a state of presence in life which makes me more aware of the things around me. In a way that has been my practice motto for the past few years and I am joyful to let life present itself to me to allow my work to grow in unexpected ways.
Embracing Complexity and Uncertainty curated by Heidi Romano is part of PHmuseum.com Online Exhibition Program

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