100 Years Later in Front of the Fountain
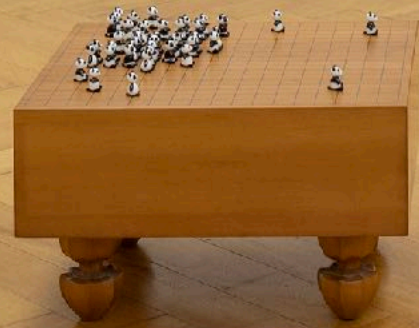
Michal Martychowiec

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100 Years Later in Front of the Fountain

In the ceaseless passage of time, we find ourselves a century later, in the contemplative presence of Marcel Duchamp's audacious Fountain. A porcelain urinal appropriated as art, this iconic creation not only challenges conventional artistic definitions but also poses profound questions concerning the identity of art. But 100 years later, as we stand before this emblem, we are compelled to ponder, just as our predecessors did, the seeming timeless riddles it evokes.

Human existence is a fleeting tapestry of traces and ephemeral whispers woven into the chronicle of time. We formulate ideologies, etch our beliefs into history's ledger, and yearn for our contributions to endure. Yet, we must ask, do these ideologies, so meticulously crafted, possess the resilience to withstand time's relentless march?

Michal Martychowie's work serves as a poignant reflection on the bourgeois concept of art's enduring significance. With Duchamp- the person and symbol in one -as his discussant, he tries to tilt the very foundation of the reading of art and asks: What lasting impact can art truly claim in a world characterized by its impermanence and destruction?

Michal Martychowiec (born in 1987) creates conceptual series of photographs, films, drawings, neons, objects, mixed media installations and environments. He is a visiting lecturer at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou and visiting scholar at the Russian Institute of Art History in Saint Petersburg. He lives and works in Berlin. In 2021, Martychowiec was selected as one of the ten finalists for the Berlin Masters Award.

Martychowiec has a mixed-media practice, with which he produces bodies of work that tease out the political relevance of the Romantic tradition. He often contemplates the contemporary human condition through an ongoing reconstruction and reconsideration of historical narratives, which he presents by relating meaningful locations, historical events, persons or works of art, with a system of symbols that he has developed. Martychowiec's inventions are based primarily on thoughts from fields including philosophy, anthropology, art and cultural history and, of course, the analysis of our contemporary culture and communication.

In terms of specific methods, Martychowiec unites artistic and curatorial practices through a twofold arrangement of his work. Initially, he develops projects as individual narratives, each within a field of inquiry. These projects inform one another—their symbolic elements are then reenacted and incorporated, through his own and others' curatorial activities, into later works, where they can acquire new meanings and qualities. Recurrent symbols include the panda, the rabbit named Josephine, and the broken glass or glass crystals.
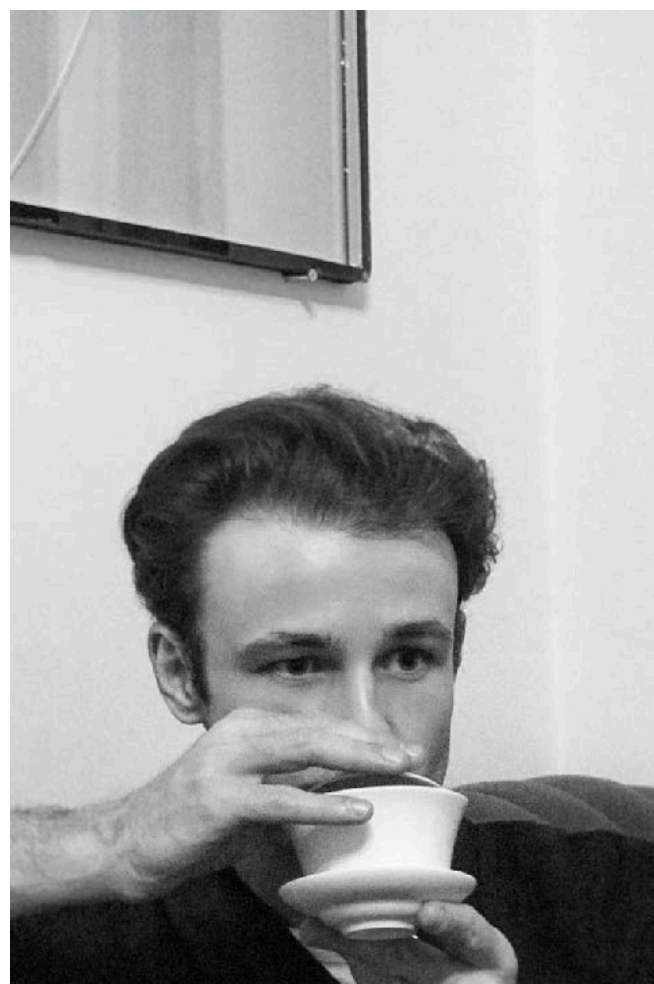
Michal Martychowiec (PL)

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Reading history

Reading history is a metaphorical investigation of the structures of history, artistic practices and in a sense, life of each individual. It provides structural frames, based on the construction of the ancient Chinese board game Weiqi, in English known as Go, to Martychowiec's practice as a whole, suggesting possibility of a hermeneutic reading to his intricate symbolic narrative.

The arist writes 'the stone itself is a nothing, but when placed on the board it becomes the representation of an idea. It is, indeed, so much alike to any gesture of an artist, where the medium is a mere representation of the concept. Once committed, the gesture remains and influences not only what precedes it, but most importantly what follows.'

Upon creation of an idea (either within a game or an artistic practice) its meaning or significance might not be clear, neither to the spectator, nor its creator, and one might have to wait for what is to follow in order for the true meaning of the gesture to surface. Of course, there are these 'moves' in the game, or these artistic gestures or events in history, which are groundbreaking. They change the meaning of history and time, or they change the meaning of anything the artist has committed up to that time.

The structure of Go, as mentioned, being so alike to that of history, provides an interesting parallel. For those knowing nothing of the game's structure, the large-format photographs of the chosen moments of historical games, mean no more than geometrical compositions. This aesthetic layer is important because it has always been inseparable from art (for history has taught us rejection of any aesthetics, like in the case of minimalism, leads only to creation of new aesthetics). But those who know of the game, or even more so, the ones who are masters of it, are capable of reading far more from that one simple geometrical composition: they might be able to estimate its placement on the timeline of history, and tell about emotions or approach of those who played it, they might be able to, with some degree of error, reconstruct the order in which the stones were placed, and then, of course, make realistic guesses of what followed and what was the game's result. This can be said equally about historians and about those who are learnt to read cultural tropes, symbols and relics.

Michal Martychowiec, 2018

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The project divides into different serial elements, among other objects, they create sub-series of:

actual full reenactments of historical games (e.g. Reading history 2016-1846), which are developed on a wooden board throughout the duration of exhibitions and influence the context, meaning and framework of all the works of art around them. That means either the symbolic gestures on the board become representatives of specific artistic gestures within the artist's practice or the course of the exhibition. Moreover, the board itself functions as a symbol of history – 'board of history'. A historical game is re-enacted rather than simply presented, to emphasise the 'reading' or rather the act of interpretation as active, ongoing and ever contemporary.

large format photographs reenacting and depicting chosen moments from games in Go history (e.g. Reading history #1 (2018-196))

large format photographs under the title Notes from the board depicting objects, images and notes are placed on the board within chosen moments of reenacted historical games. These elements are each time specifically connected either to other narratives developed by Martychowiec or to specific moments of history which are of relevance to these narratives.

and lastly, historical stones functioning similarly to framed relics, coming under the title Naming history. Comparing to the other cycles within this project, the approach here is different. Each physical stone, contains within itself a compilation of ideas it was used to represent as games were played with it throughout its 'life'. It is impossible to know the games it was used in, but it is possible to subject it to the process of mythologisation. Thus, the selected stones are individualised and assigned meaning in a twofold fashion: by 'placing' them in the context of a historical game (saying such stone was used by such player, at such time, playing such game) and the context of history (assigning a specific historical event to it). The twofold contextualisation is determined by either an artistic decision or an artistically developed system; together, both of them complete the act of the object's aestheticisation. Interpreting history through an artistic process has a mythological capacity, and in this case, results in neither archival nor archaeological-like objects. Instead, it develops a relic like aura around these stones-turned-readymades. The 'aura' is constituted not only through the stone's pre-work-of-art 'past' but also through the specific roles it takes within the following exhibition context (as a work of art). The history grows on top of it, even though the foundation might be an artistic fabrication. Such is the nature of the myth.
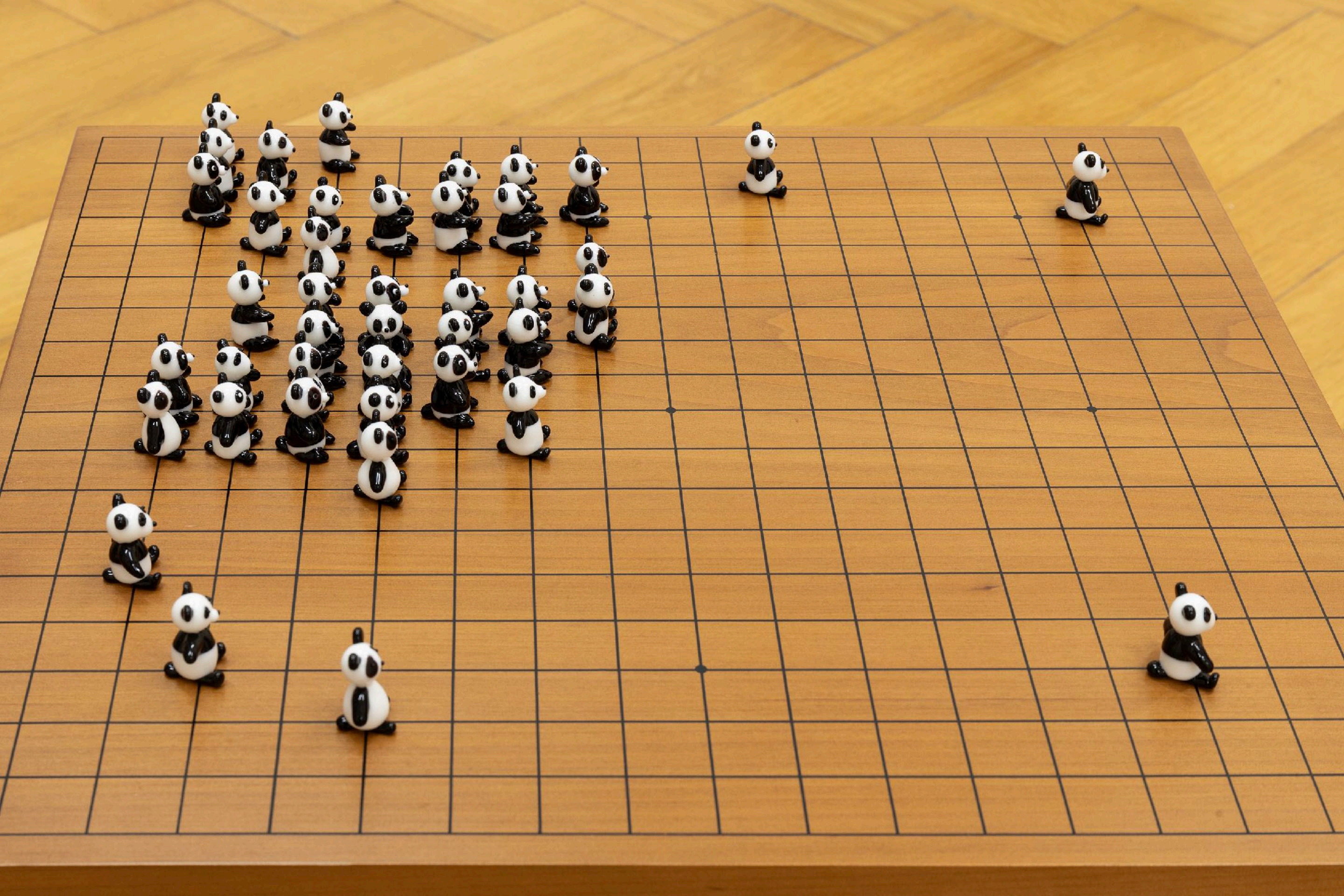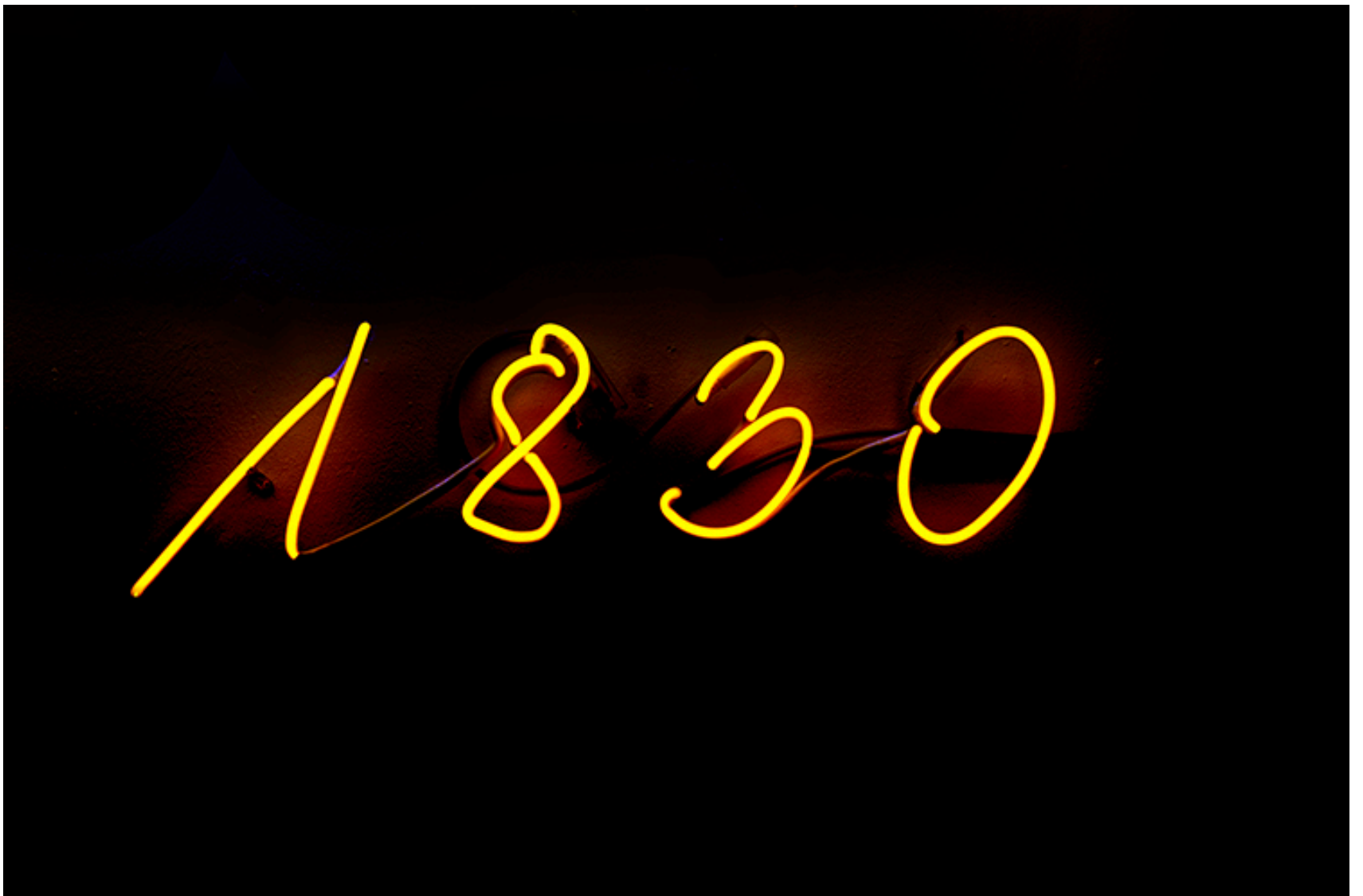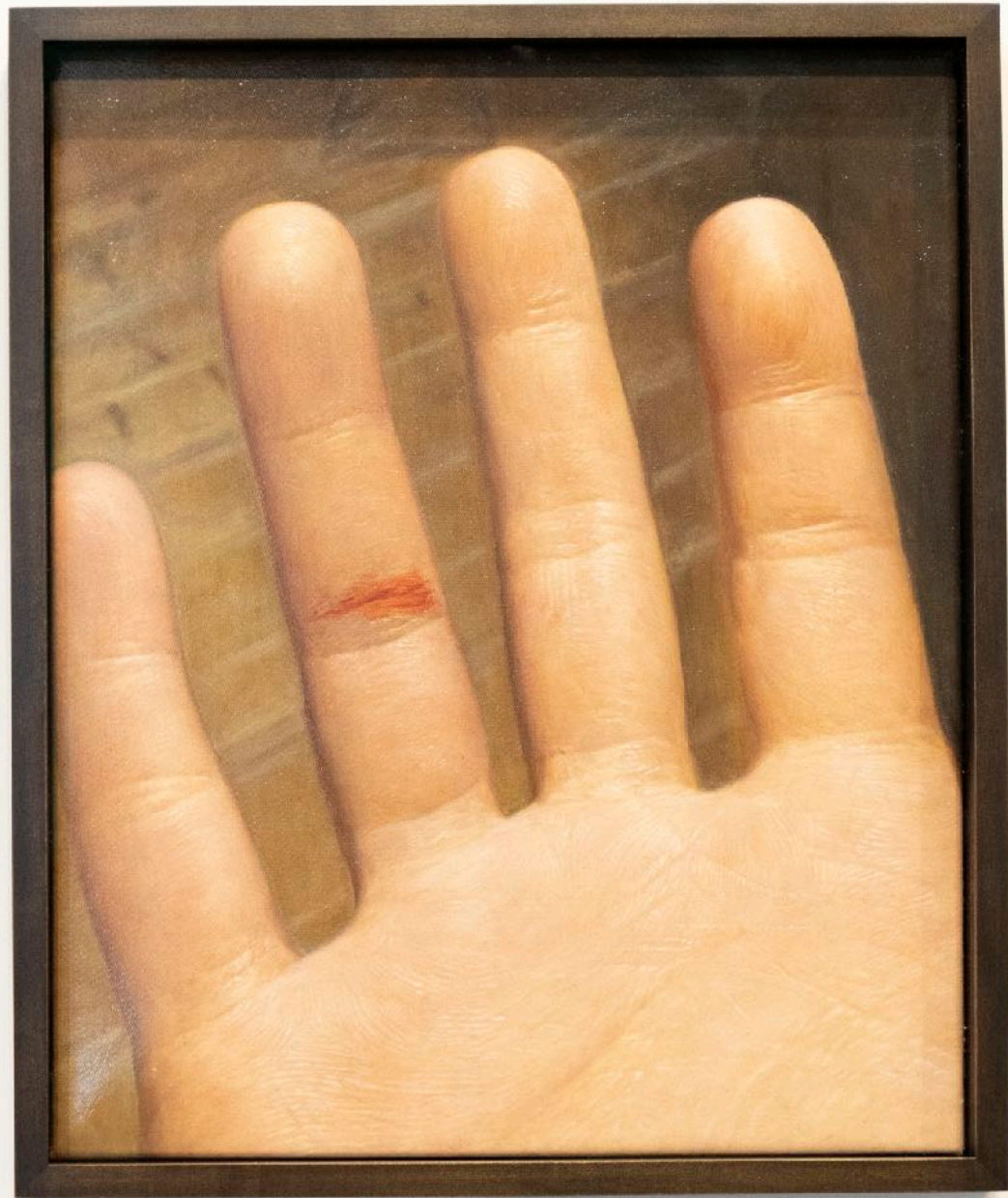
Michal Martychowiec, 2018
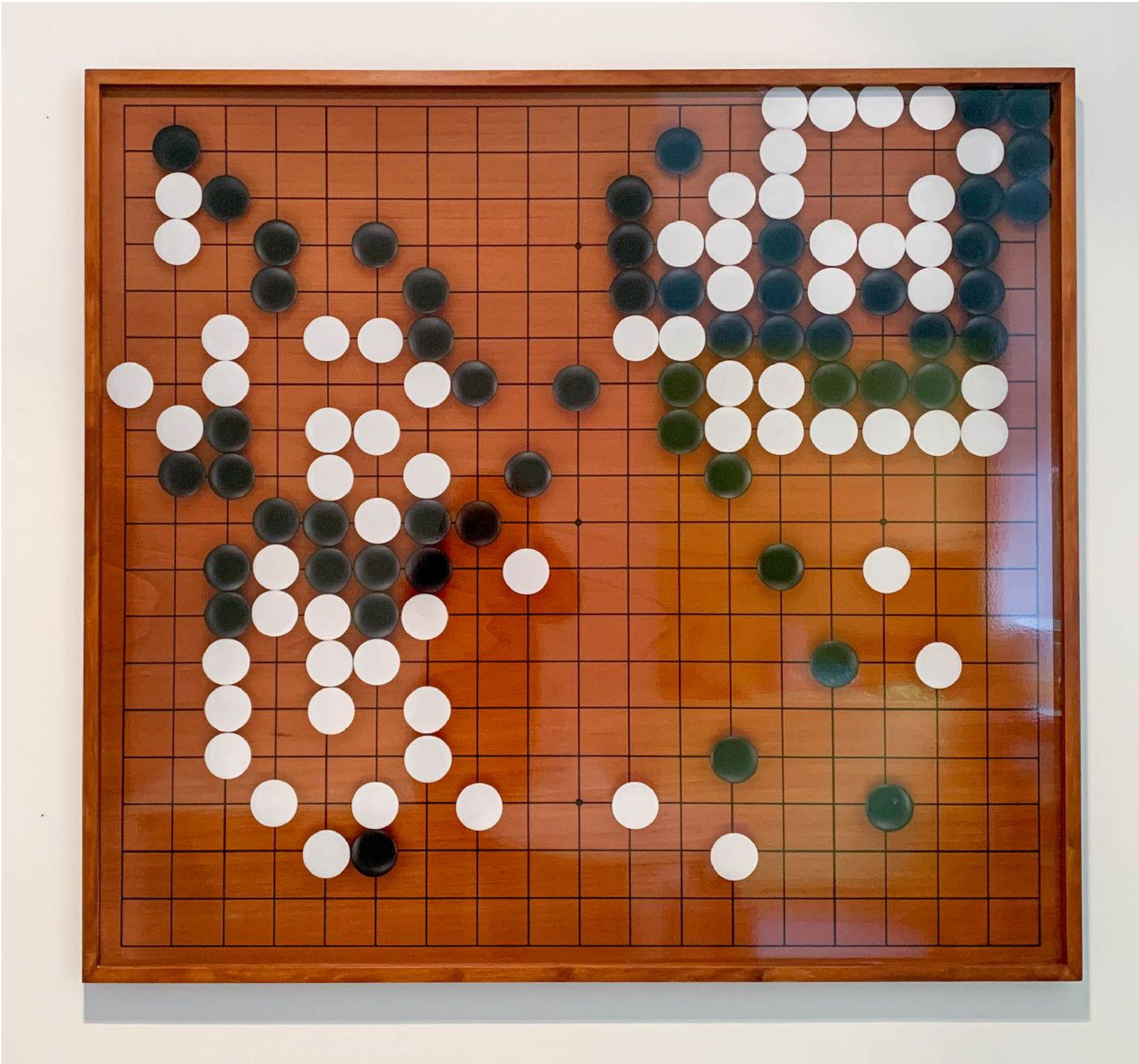
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What is panda is a condition of a thing
Go board, 1 glass panda figurine, slate and clamshell stones, dimensions variable, unique

Naming history #1 (2017-1846): Death of Plutarch
arrangement of framed clamshell and slate Go stones, unique

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Man is a political creature, 2023
72 x 58cm, oil on canvas, unique

Everything about the contemporary is panda

In his book The Protean Self: Human Resilience in the Age of Fragmentation R.J. Lifton refers to the fragmentation of identity of the contemporary man. The solitary pandas which used to occupy considerably large habitats on their own, were unable to mate as these habitats became separated due the China's modernisation. Their world became fragmented.

However, the pandas are not as 'fluid' or adjustable as Lifton claim the human to be. They found their biological niche through a genetic mutation in the spine, which allowed them to sit comfortably. Bamboo, their primary food source, is poor in nutrients and has to be eaten 16 hours a day, due to which their libido has remained particularly low.

The development of the panda reserve in China has become almost a sort of governmentality experiment. Originally, outbursts of aggression of the wild pandas kept at the man-made reserve were subdued with force. Only later, the violence of those in power was replaced with another method. Now, the pandas which are already extinct in the wild, a museums piece, are provided with an abundance of food and different forms of entertainment. They live in so-called 'panda villas', where they are looked after by guards, psychologists, veterinarians and fan groups. The majority of procreation occurs through artificial insemination. The newly out of labour mothers are happy to give their babies away for a bowl of honey. The pandas have become docile and domesticated.

For Martychowiec, the panda has become a significant symbolic element since 2016. It functions on several levels and throughout many different areas of human activity: politics, culture, conservation, ecology, but most importantly as a symbol of the contemporary man intertwined within the power structures which mould him/her to their benefit.

The panda is the most reappearing element, as it follows modes of existence of the spectator and most importantly pivotal moments of art history, whereas the other elements become interwoven comments on contemporary human conditions. This project is in a very direct discourse to two other bodies of work: The incredulity of St Thomas (where Thomas becomes a somewhat symbol of the spectator) and Josephine (where the rabbit Josephine becomes an existential symbol in opposition to the panda).

Michal Martychowiec, 2016

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Panda contemplating the black square 2016
ceramic, chromogenic print, dimensions variable

Panda contemplating the black square 2016 Panda contemplating the black square 2016 (details)
ceramic, chromogenic print, dimensions variable

What is often hard to see in a work is its middle

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Everything about the contemporary is panda, 2017
chromogenic prints, dimensions variable, Ed. 3+1AP

This certainly is reading

Josephine

Josephine is one of the rabbits who were hopping away in a gallery space in 2016, as part of the installation Do you believe in art?. The artist draws the rabbits as ones who were spared the fate Beuys's hare met in the process of art-making.

Josephine is a work of art in the form of a living rabbit. 'While alive, a work of art, and when dead, a part of art history'. In this sense, it is a symbolic re-enactment of art history and its contingency. Through its form, it continuously questions the paradigm of art, which is thus redefined in the context of its own, and other works of art around it. Throughout Josephine's life, various works of art are being made, within which the rabbit functions as an incorporated work of art and a symbol.

Josephine is, of course, on the very basic level, the symbol and embodiment of life, ever fleeing and never truly tangible. And it is thus she can never be fully contained within man-made systems: i.e. this work of art is neither appropriate for the museum or the art space, nor other virtual realities of all sorts. For a virtual reality, a system (also called program) has to be created. To create such a system the [created] thing has to be within the scope of our complete understanding and prediction. This is why Josephine can never become contained within such context; because Josephine as a living being continuously escapes reason. Most importantly, however, this existential entity is co-constituted by its historical situation, which makes Josephine a historical entity in opposition to the panda within the artistic narrative of Martychowiec. In Everything about the contemporary is panda the panda becomes a representation of the contemporary man who lacks capacity to understand and formulate history.

In its attempt at the destruction of the Icon, the Black Square was destined to simply replace it. It thus became a new symbol and source of a new materialistic myth, which due to its quality has remained material. One visit to the actual physical object makes one realise it actually exists within the materialist reality, that it is just a painting, and this material presence thus shatters its myth. On the other hand, Josephine does not offer such a possibility. Once established, her myth can remain, precisely because she is destined to disappear, despite any conservation efforts. Josephine is then what remains through the various other works of art which point to her and which introduce Josephine's myth. She is the source (in the same sense as the Black Square became the symbolic source of creation and the new materialist holy).

Malevich wrote: 'the image that survives the work of destruction is the image of destruction'.

What can then survive the work of destruction of the oversaturation and overproduction of contemporary modern culture? Now, at the time when everything is attainable in the abundance of internet when technology can reconstruct anything and the institutions maintain countless works of art on a mass scale. Which of these works will be able to avoid the destruction of their myth? Only a work of art as a living being, with its impermanence and destined unattainability, can create an indestructible myth and thus survive the work of destruction in the digi-materialistic era.
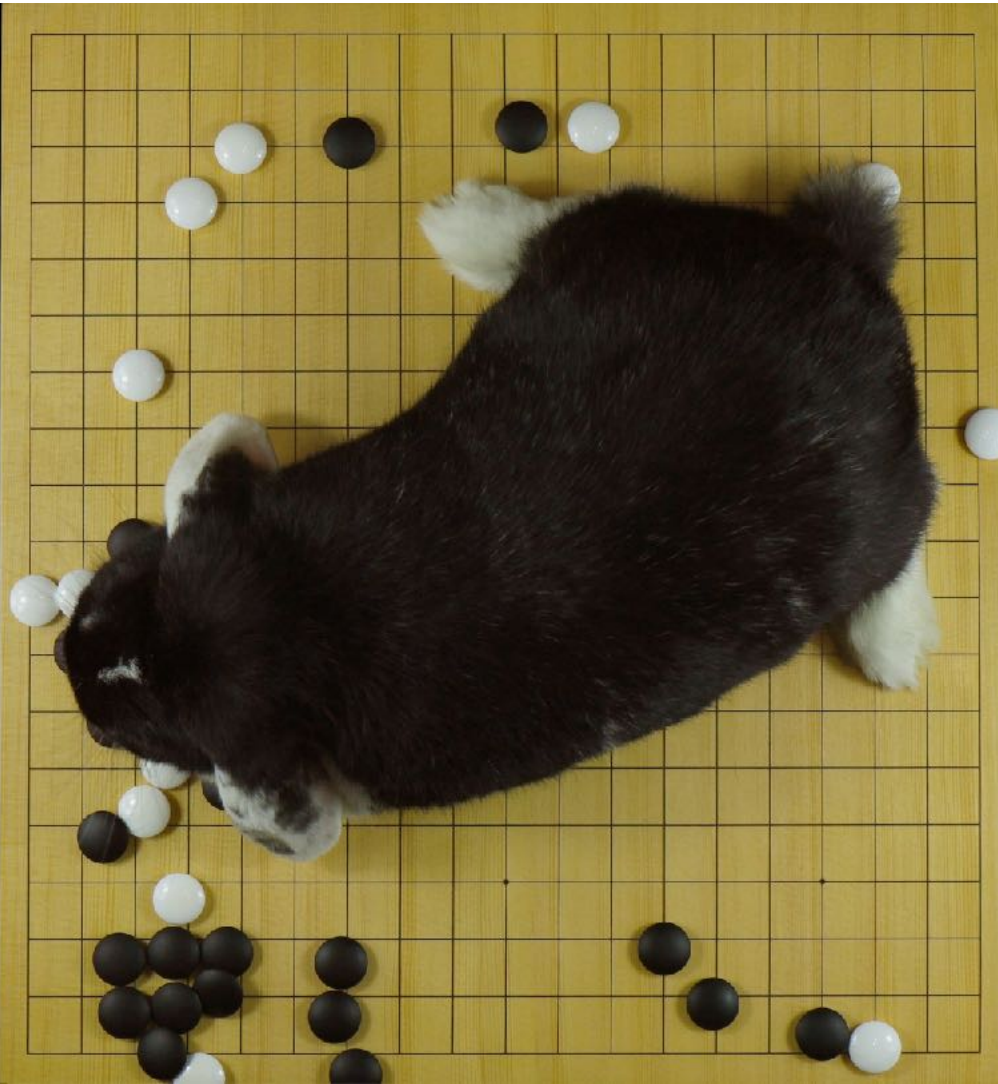
Michal Martychowiec, 2019

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Modus vivendi
1 painted go board, 1 go board, ceramic, dimensions variable, unique
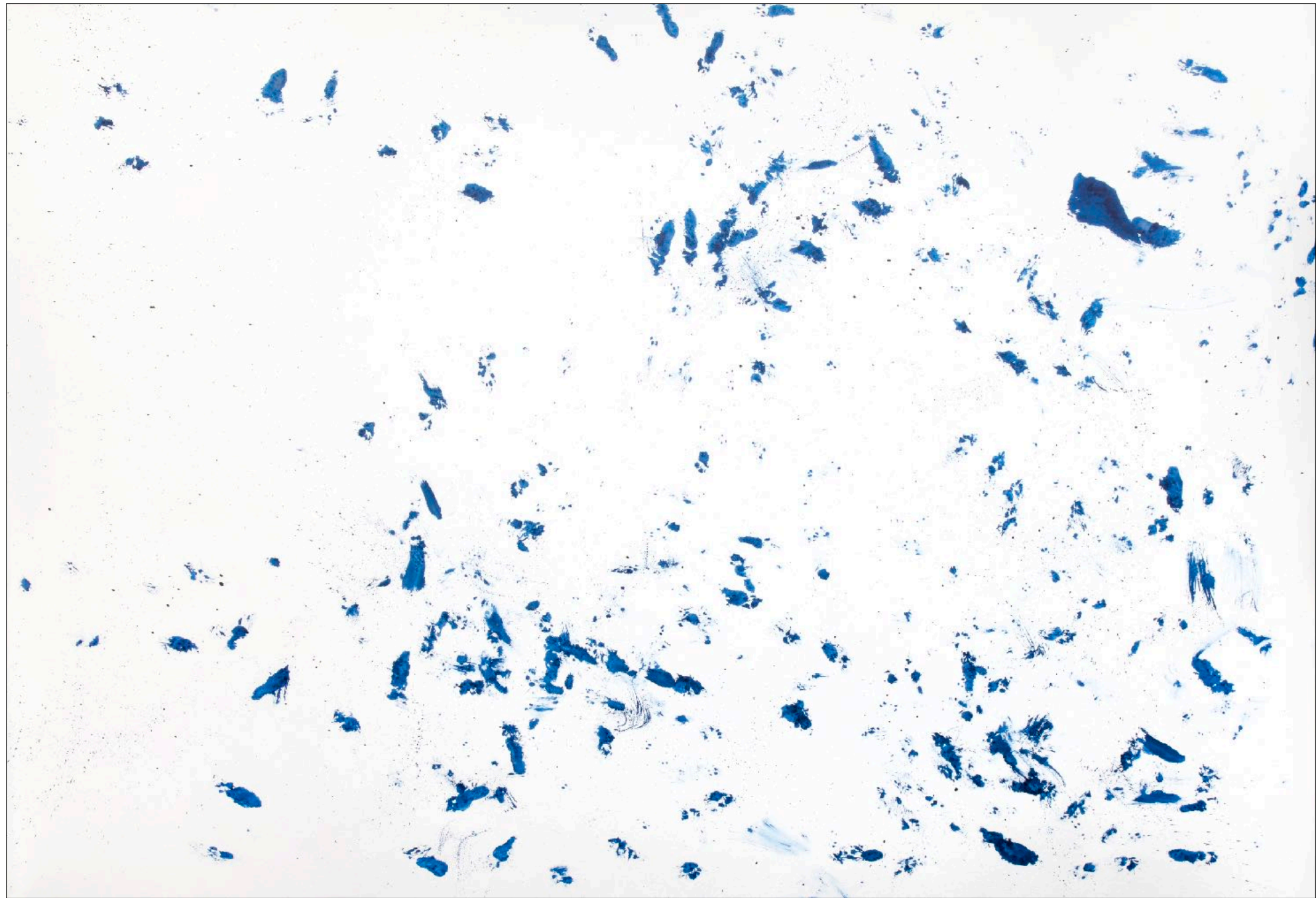
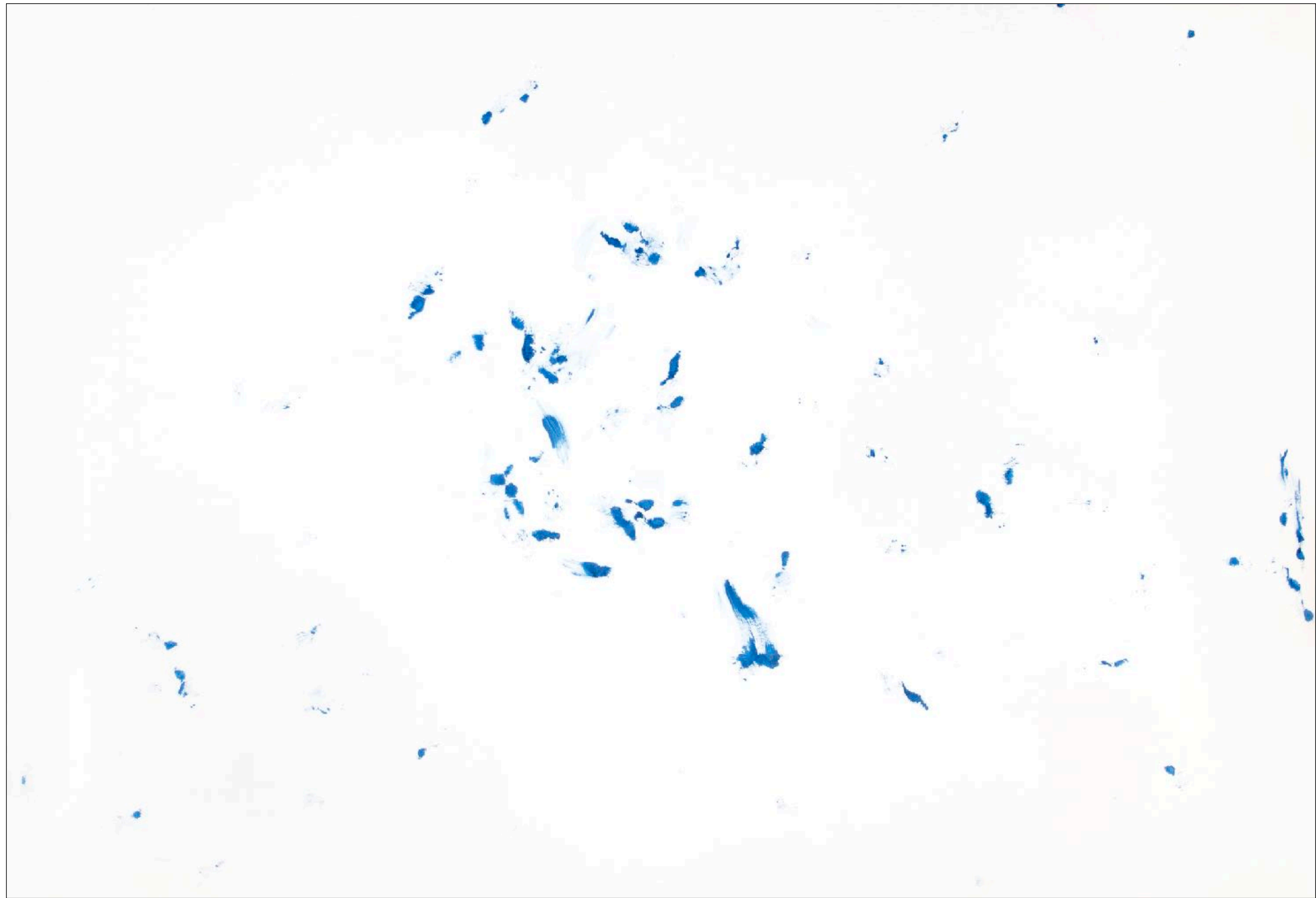We are here, together, for now

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Still from 'Pixelated Venus' 2017
chromogenic print, 90x120 cm

Josephine, reading history, 2017/2020
2-channel 4k video 00:24:00

Shredder 2019
chromaluxe print, shredded art periodicals, 48x44x4 cm

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Shredder 2019 (Details)
chromaluxe print, shredded art periodicals, 48x44x4 cm

Shredder 2019
chromaluxe print, shredded art periodicals, 48x44x4 cm

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Shredder 2019 (Details)
chromaluxe print, shredded art periodicals, 48x44x4 cm

wer 100

had no food

Shredder 2019 (Details)
chromaluxe print, shredded art periodicals, 48x44x4 cm

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Return of the Real 2020
oil on canvas 55x55 cm
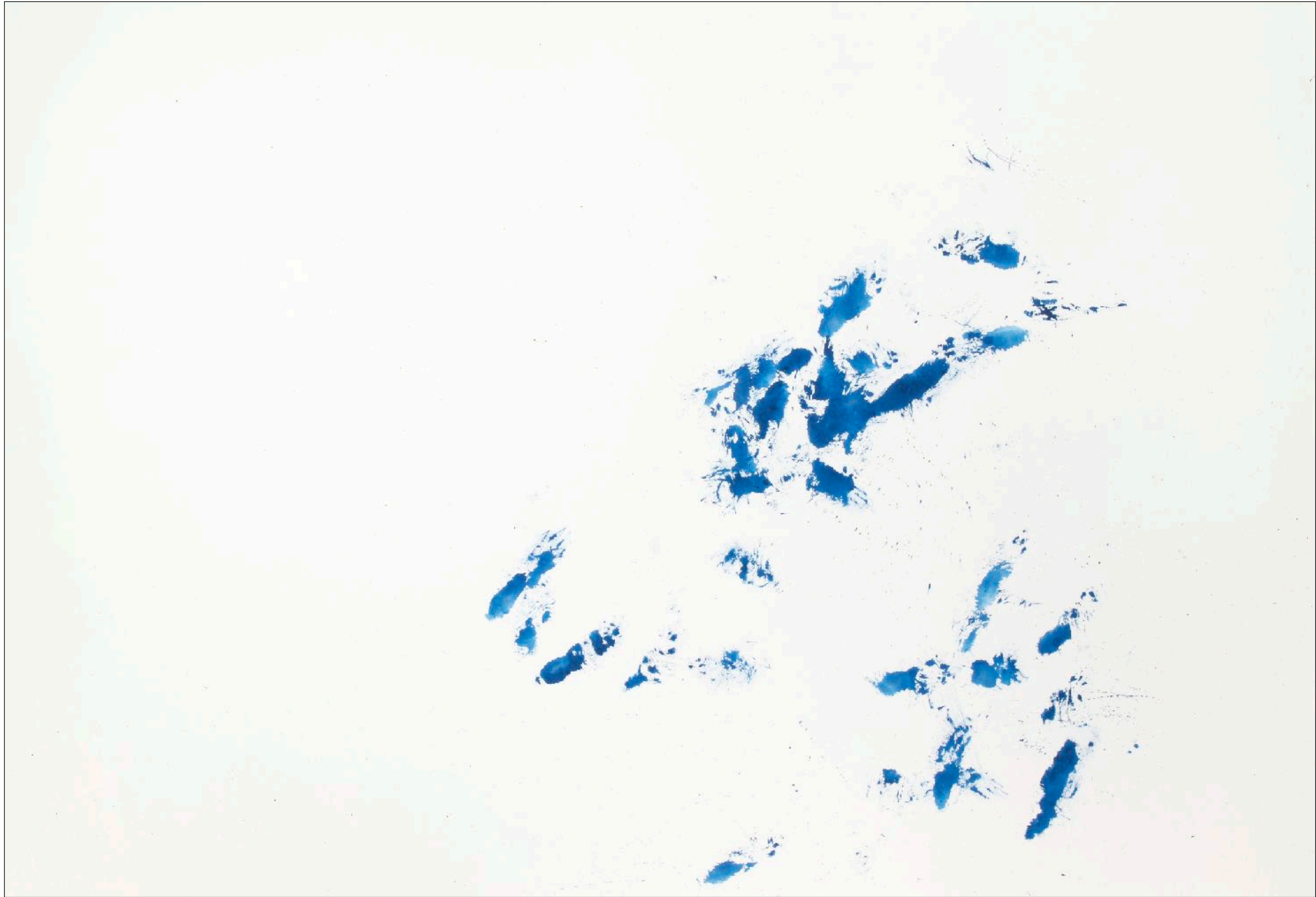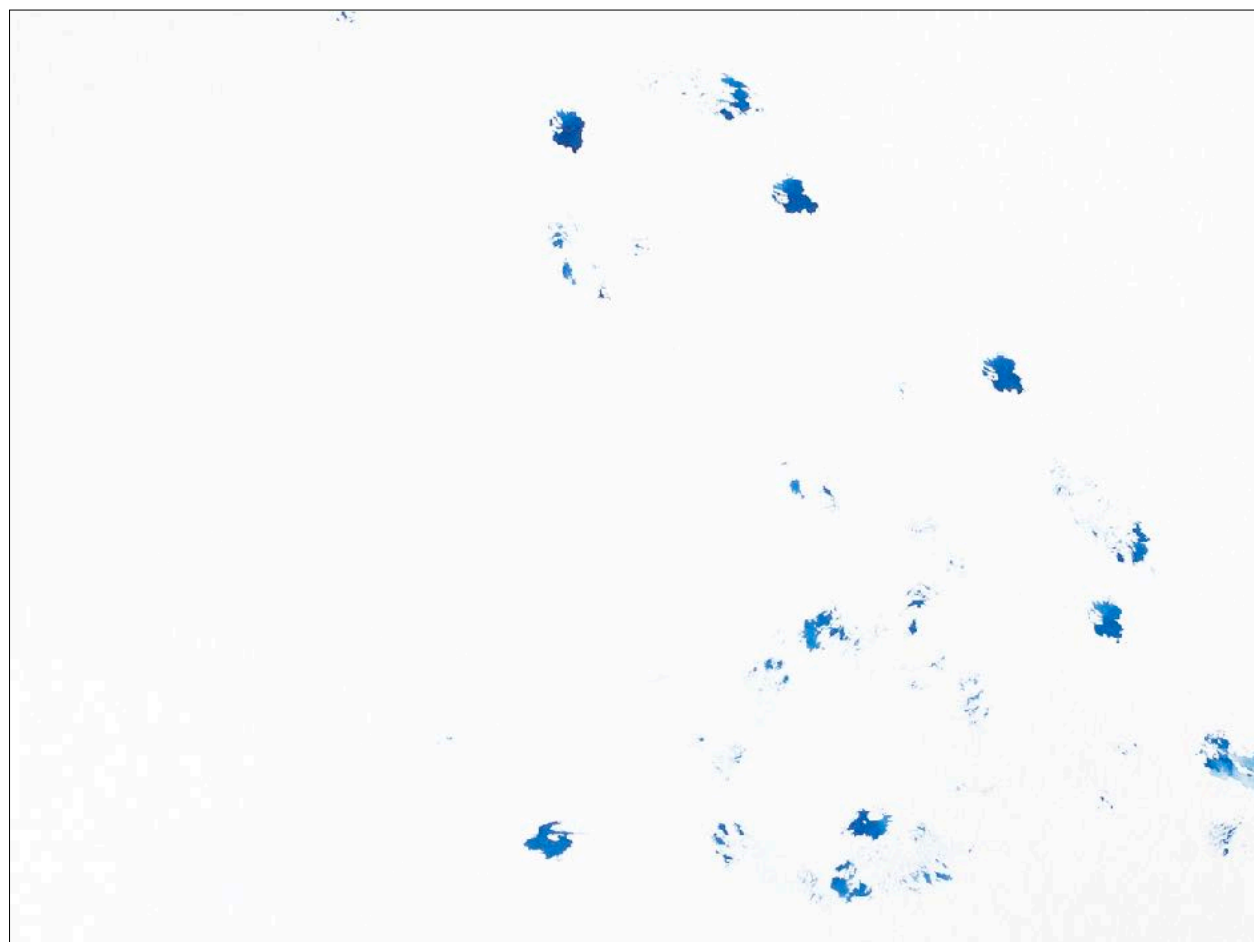
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Shadows and other signs of life 2019
ink on paper 125 x 180 cm

Shadows and other signs of life 2019
ink on paper 125 x 180 cm

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Shadows and other signs of life 2019
ink on paper 70x100 cm

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Shadows and other signs of life 2019
ink on paper 70x100 cm

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Shadows and other signs of life 2019
ink on paper 36 x 48 cm

Pentagon. Josephine must go! 2019
steel, dimensions variable

Josephine 2018
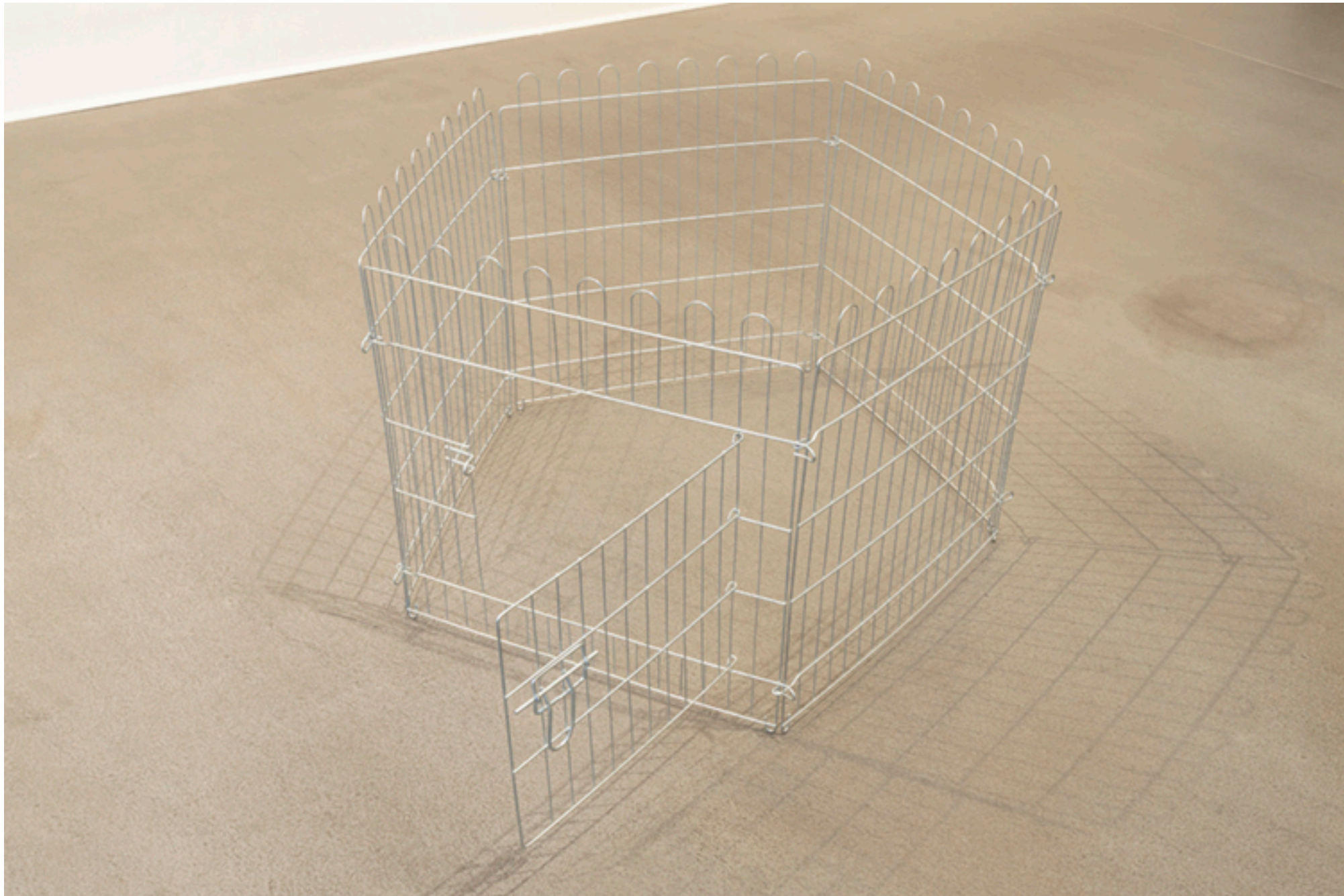Hexachrome print on satine paper, 60x50 cm, Ed. 99
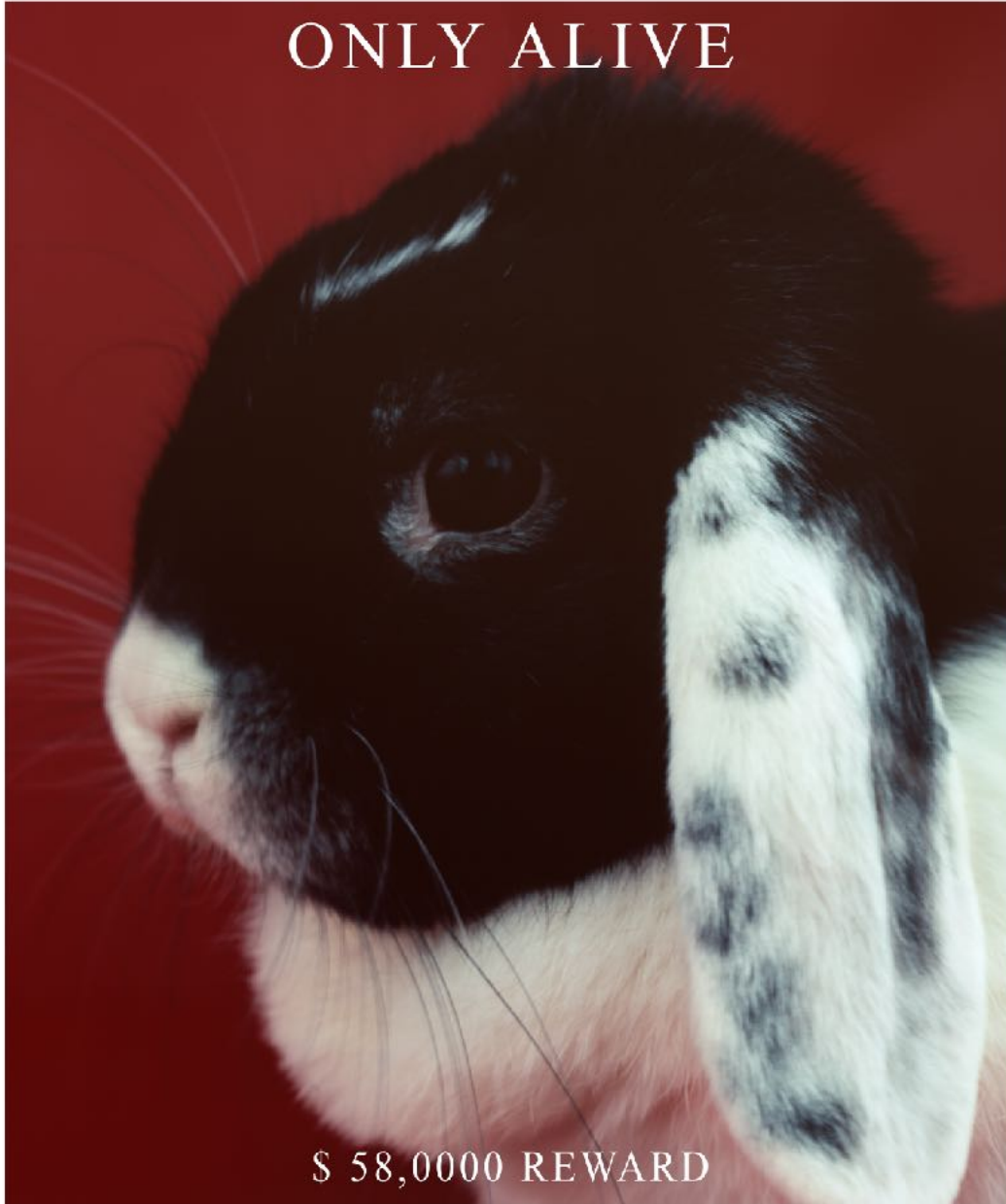
WANTED

ONLY ALIVE

$ 58,0000 REWARD

For information leading to the arrest of JOSEPHINE BEUYS, alias JOSEPH, alias RABBIT, etc. Operated in an artist's studio in Berlin under the status of a work of ART. Height about 15 cm. Weight about 3 kg. Complexion BLACK AND WHITE.

NADAN

Josephine 2018
Hexachrome print on satine paper, 60x50 cm, Ed. 33

WANTED

ONLY ALIVE

$ 167,0000 REWARD

For information leading to the arrest of JOSEPHINE BEUYS, alias JOSEPH, alias RABBIT, etc. Operated in an artist's studio in Berlin under the status of a work of ART. Height about 15 cm. Weight about 3 kg. Complexion BLACK AND WHITE.

NADAN

Josephine 2018
Hexachrome print on satine paper, 60x50 cm, Ed. 11

WANTED

$ 999,0000 REWARD

For information leading to the arrest of JOSEPHINE BEUYS, alias JOSEPH, alias RABBIT, etc. Operated in an artist's studio in Berlin under the status of a work of ART. Height about 15 cm. Weight about 3 kg. Complexion BLACK AND WHITE.

NADAN

Josephine 2018
Hexachrome print on satine paper, 60x50 cm, Unique

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NADAN is an independent cultural platform based in Berlin. We promote contemporary emerging art, design, creativity and ideas. We believe in dialogue. Our generation is being called upon to rethink the old, uncover the past in a new way, and inspire the world with the courage to think differently through beauty and honour.

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