

SUSAN SONTAG

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**ON PHOTOGRAPHY:  
IN PLATO'S CAVE**

# SUSAN SONTAG

- ▶ Lived from 1933 - 2004
- ▶ An American essayist, short story writer, novelist, screenwriter, filmmaker, and film critic
- ▶ A provocative commentator on modern culture who came into high influence in the 1960's through 70's
- ▶ Longtime companion of Annie Leibovitz



## SUSAN SONTAG' BOOK, ON PHOTOGRAPHY

- ▶ A collection of essays published in 1977
- ▶ The essays are of a polemic nature, rather than academic
  - ▶ An aggressive attack on the conventional values and opinions regarding photography
  - ▶ No bibliography or documentation of research



ANTRVM PLATONICVM



Maxima pars hominum cecis immersa tenebris  
 Volvitur assidue, et s' studio letatur inani:  
 Adspice ut obiectis obtutis in hereat umbris,  
 Ut VERI simulacra omnes mirentur amentq;



Et s' solidi vanâ ludantur imagine rerum.  
 Quam pauci meliore luto, qui in lumine puro  
 Secreti à s' solida turba, ludibria cernunt  
 Rerum umbras rectas, expendunt omnia lauce:



Hi posita erroris nebula' dignoscere possunt  
 Vera bona, atque alios ceca sub nocte latentes  
 Extrahere in claram lucem conantur, ut illis  
 Nullus amor lucis, tanta est Irrationis egestas.



C.C. Harlemensis Juv.  
 Janredam Sculpsit.  
 Henr. Hondius excudit.  
 1604.

H.L. SPIEGEL FIGVRARI ET SCVLPV CVRAVIT. AC DOCTISS. ORNATISS. QZD PET. PAAW IN LVGDVN. ACAD. PROFESSORI MEDICO D.D.





The fire

shadows cast  
on wall

Prisoners

Roadway where  
puppeteers perform

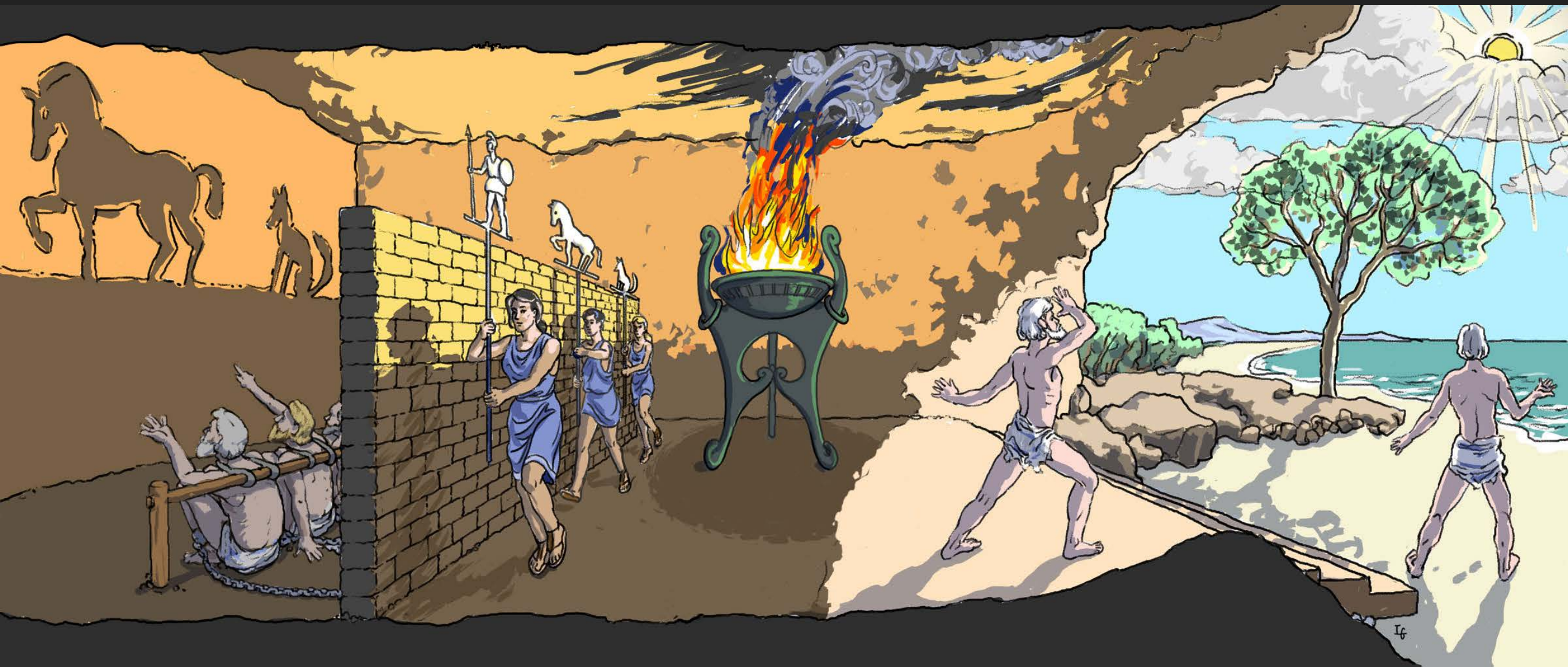
## IN PLATO'S CAVE

- ▶ Prisoners mistake the forms of the shadows for reality
- ▶ Their language is based on their perception of the shadows, not the real objects that cause them
  - ▶ A shadow of a cat would be perceived as the actual cat
- ▶ When prisoners are freed and able to see the source of the shadows, they are blinded by the light source
  - ▶ The shadows will at first seem more real than the objects themselves



## IN PLATO'S CAVE

- ▶ In time, the prisoner's eyes would adjust and he could comprehend the objects with his mind using reflective understanding
- ▶ Once enlightened, the prisoner would return to his fellow prisoners to enlighten them as well with his new knowledge
- ▶ In descending back into the cave, the prisoner would appear to lose his eyesight (from losing his night-vision)
- ▶ Based on this, the prisoners would not want to be enlightened and would view it as a negative experience



PLATO'S CAVE ILLUSTRATION

*Illustration*



## ON PHOTOGRAPHY: IN PLATO'S CAVE

- ▶ Sontag draws an analogy between the prisoners in Plato's cave and our viewing of photographs
- ▶ The multitude of images lead us to construct our perception of the world & its events in our heads

# PHOTOGRAPHY INFLUENCES US

- ▶ Photography is so widespread, and subject matter so encompassing, that it has influenced our tastes and ethics
  - ▶ What we think is worth seeing
  - ▶ What we feel we have a right to see





**“PHOTOGRAPHS ALTER AND ENLARGE OUR NOTION OF WHAT IS WORTH LOOKING AT AND WHAT WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO OBSERVE. THEY ARE A GRAMMAR AND, EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY, AN ETHICS OF SEEING.”**

**Susan Sontag**

# PHOTOGRAPHY STARTS WITH REALITY

- ▶ Photographs are not considered interpretations in the same way as writings or illustrations
- ▶ Photography's association with reality sets it apart from other media, in terms of how we regard it
  - ▶ Behind every photograph, there was something there in the first place



# PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SOCIAL RITE

- ▶ Photography is mass produced, but is also a social rite, a mass art
- ▶ We certify our experiences through taking photographs
  - ▶ Photographs are a token of absence—specific, historic and immediate
  - ▶ The world portrayed is not one of understanding or knowledge, but of aesthetic consumerism



**“TO COLLECT PHOTOGRAPHS IS  
TO COLLECT THE WORLD . . .  
PHOTOGRAPHS REALLY ARE  
EXPERIENCE CAPTURED, AND  
THE CAMERA IS THE IDEAL  
ARM OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN  
ITS ACQUISITIVE MOOD.”**

**Susan Sontag**



# PHOTOS ARE OUR MEMENTOS

- ▶ Taking photos is like collecting important parts of your life: special objects, people, places and events
- ▶ It's easy to collect and share things this way
- ▶ Instead of collecting for just for our own memories, a majority of what we shoot is now for sharing online
- ▶ Photographs certify an experience
  - ▶ "Pics or it didn't happen."





**NURSE @ BEAUMONT HOSPITAL  
ROYAL OAK**

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*Baby Eva*





**SUJIN KHALIFA**

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*Birthday Party*





## ARTEM BALI

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*A daredevil selfie taken while swinging high above the trees in Bali, Indonesia*





**YURI BELETSKY**

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*Super Wolf Blood Moon Lunar  
Eclipse 2019*



# PHOTOGRAPHS ARE REALITY INTERPRETED

- ▶ Sontag describes painting, speech and writing as *"narrowly selective interpretation"*
- ▶ She describes photography as *"narrowly selective transparency"*

# PHOTOGRAPHS ARE REALITY INTERPRETED

- ▶ Sontag references photos taken for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) project as an example of the interpretation
- ▶ Photographers would take numerous photos of the same person until they had captured the correct expression that conveyed their interpretation of the poverty





**FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (FSA)**

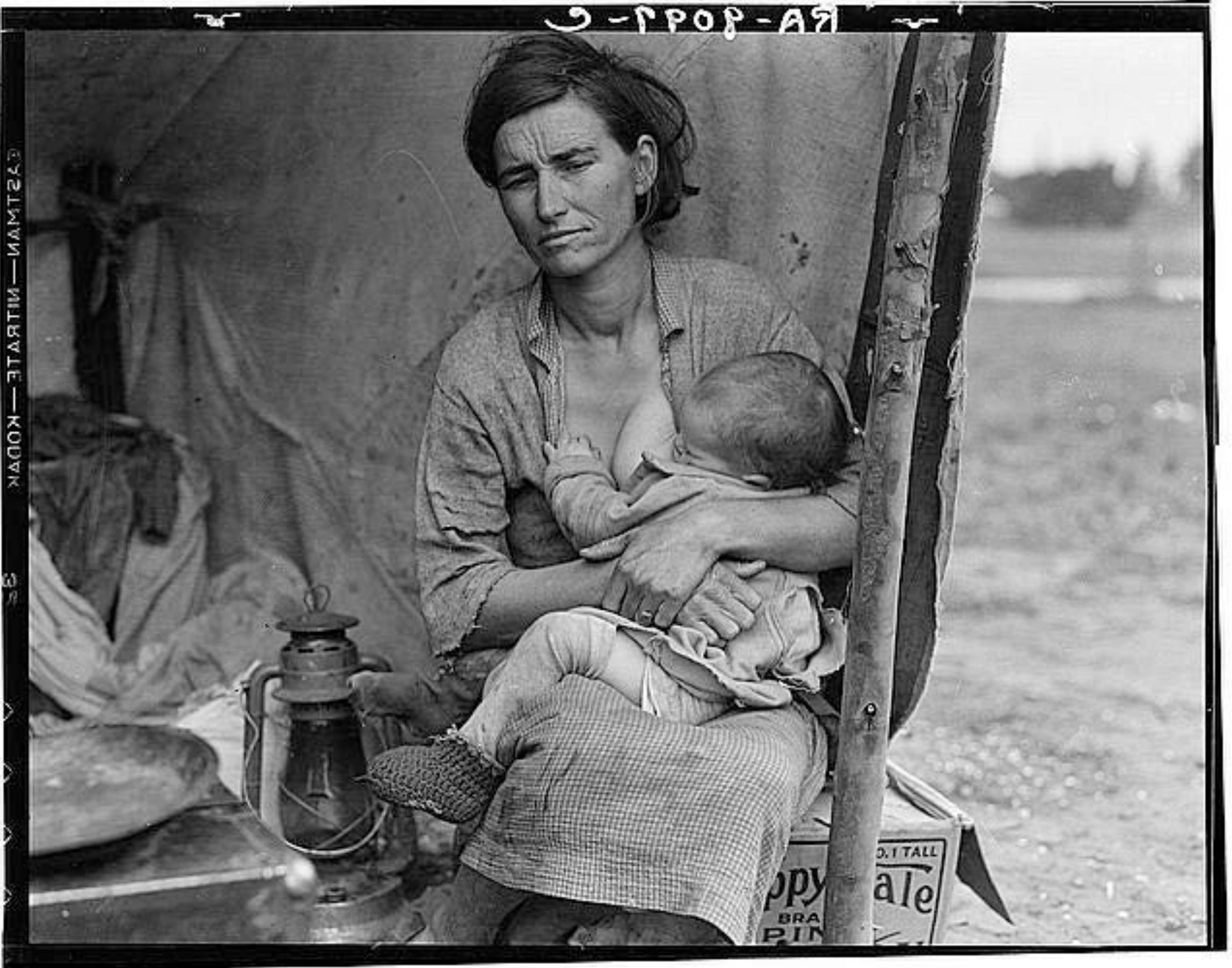
*Migrant Mother, by Dorothea Lange*



9-1908-A9

© 1937 M.V.N. — NITRATE — KODAK

32



**FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (FSA)**

*Migrant Mother, by Dorothea Lange*



3-2-POP-AR

KODAK-NITRATE-KODAK

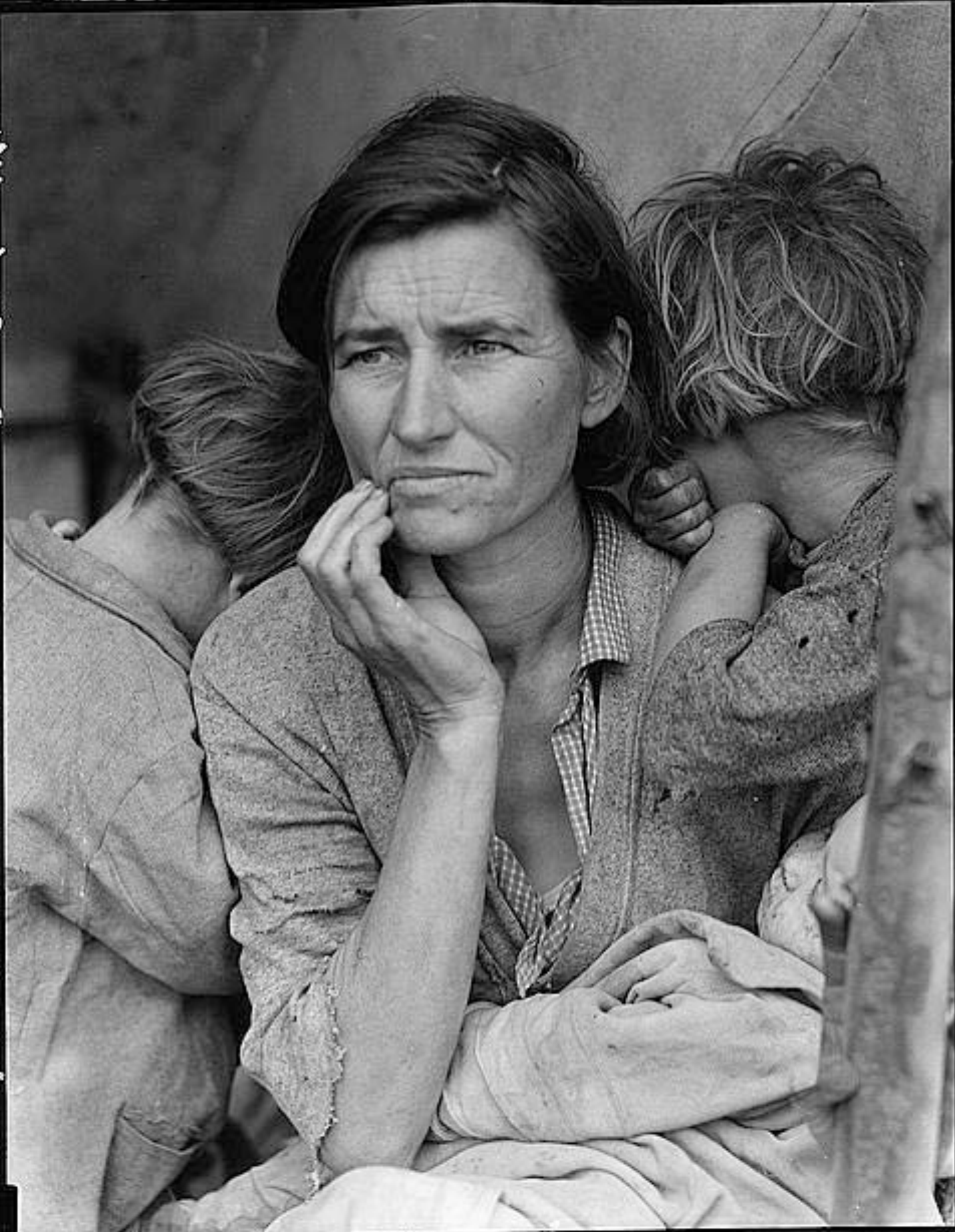


**FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (FSA)**

*Migrant Mother, by Dorothea Lange*



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**FARM SECURITY  
ADMINISTRATION (FSA)**

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*Migrant Mother,  
by Dorothea Lange*

## PHOTOGRAPHY & EVENTS

- ▶ Photographs cannot identify events, photography follows the naming of events
- ▶ A moral reaction depends on the moral / political standpoint
  - ▶ Without this, horrifying photographs will be seen as unreal or demoralizing

# IMPACT OF PHOTOGRAPHS

- ▶ In order to shock, photographs need to be novel, hence they become more and more horrific
- ▶ Sontag refers to seeing photos of the Nazi death camps at Bergen-Belsen and Dachau and states that was a turning point in her life
  - ▶ "Some limit had been reached...I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying."





**BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP**

1945





**VILLAGERS FLEEING A NAPALM ATTACK**

*Nick Ut, 1972*



## IMPACT OF PHOTOGRAPHS

- ▶ Sontag concludes that seeing a photograph like Nick Ut's napalm bombed child can have far greater impact than words ever could
- ▶ What good is served from seeing images like these?



**5 YEAR OLD SYRIAN BOY AFTER AIRSTRIKE ON ALEPPO**

*Mahmoud Rslan, 2016*









**TENTS NEXT TO THE MEXICAN BORDER IN TORNILLO, TEXAS**

*Mike Blake, 2018*



## IMPACT OF PHOTOGRAPHS

- ▶ Initially photography can make things seem more real, but constant exposure makes it less real
- ▶ Photographs do not hold their moral value with age, but become "ethical reference points"

## PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN ART

- ▶ Sontag states, "Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by being photographed, touched by pathos."
  - ▶ An elegy being a poem, usually about the dead
- ▶ By freezing a moment, photographs show the subject's mortality and inevitability of change





**EUGENE ATGET**

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*Paris*





DETROIT

circa 1920





UNTITLED, DETROIT

*Don Hudson, 1980*





**MANZANAR RELOCATION CENTER FROM TOWER**

*Ansel Adams, 1943*





## UNTITLED, HARLEM

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*Gordon Parks, 1949*

**ALL PHOTOGRAPHS ARE MEMENTO MORI. TO TAKE A PHOTOGRAPH IS TO PARTICIPATE IN ANOTHER PERSON'S (OR THING'S) MORTALITY, VULNERABILITY, MUTABILITY. PRECISELY BY SLICING OUT THIS MOMENT AND FREEZING IT, ALL PHOTOGRAPHS TESTIFY TO TIME'S RELENTLESS MELT.**

**Susan Sontag**





**THE BROWN SISTERS**

1975





**THE BROWN SISTERS**

1977





**THE BROWN SISTERS**

1981



**THE BROWN SISTERS**

1988





**THE BROWN SISTERS**

1997





**THE BROWN SISTERS**

1999





**THE BROWN SISTERS**

2004



**THE BROWN SISTERS**

2014



## “ONE NEVER UNDERSTANDS ANYTHING FROM A PHOTOGRAPH”

- ▶ Sontag states that photographs fail for five reasons
- ▶ Reason #1:
  - ▶ A photograph is a piece of time and space. By excluding or including things within the frame, it creates or breaks relationships; thus presenting reality in small, discontinuous particles



## LEANING TOWER OF PISA

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*Tourist photo*





TARI, SHAWN, AND SUMMER, 2012, LOS ANGELES

*Richard Renaldi*





**NATHAN AND ROBYN, 2012,  
PROVINCETOWN, MASS**

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*Richard Renaldi*





**DONNA AND DONNA, 2011, CRAIG, COLO.**

*Richard Renaldi*





**DONNA AND DONNA, 2011, CRAIG, COLO.**

*Richard Renaldi*



## ONE NEVER UNDERSTANDS ANYTHING FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

- ▶ Reason #2:
  - ▶ A photograph only shows us the surface, leaving the viewer to deduce or intuit what the reality was like



## THE PYRAMIDS OF GIZA

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*Isabella Juskova*





**THE PYRAMIDS OF GIZA AERIAL**

*Robster1983, 2011*



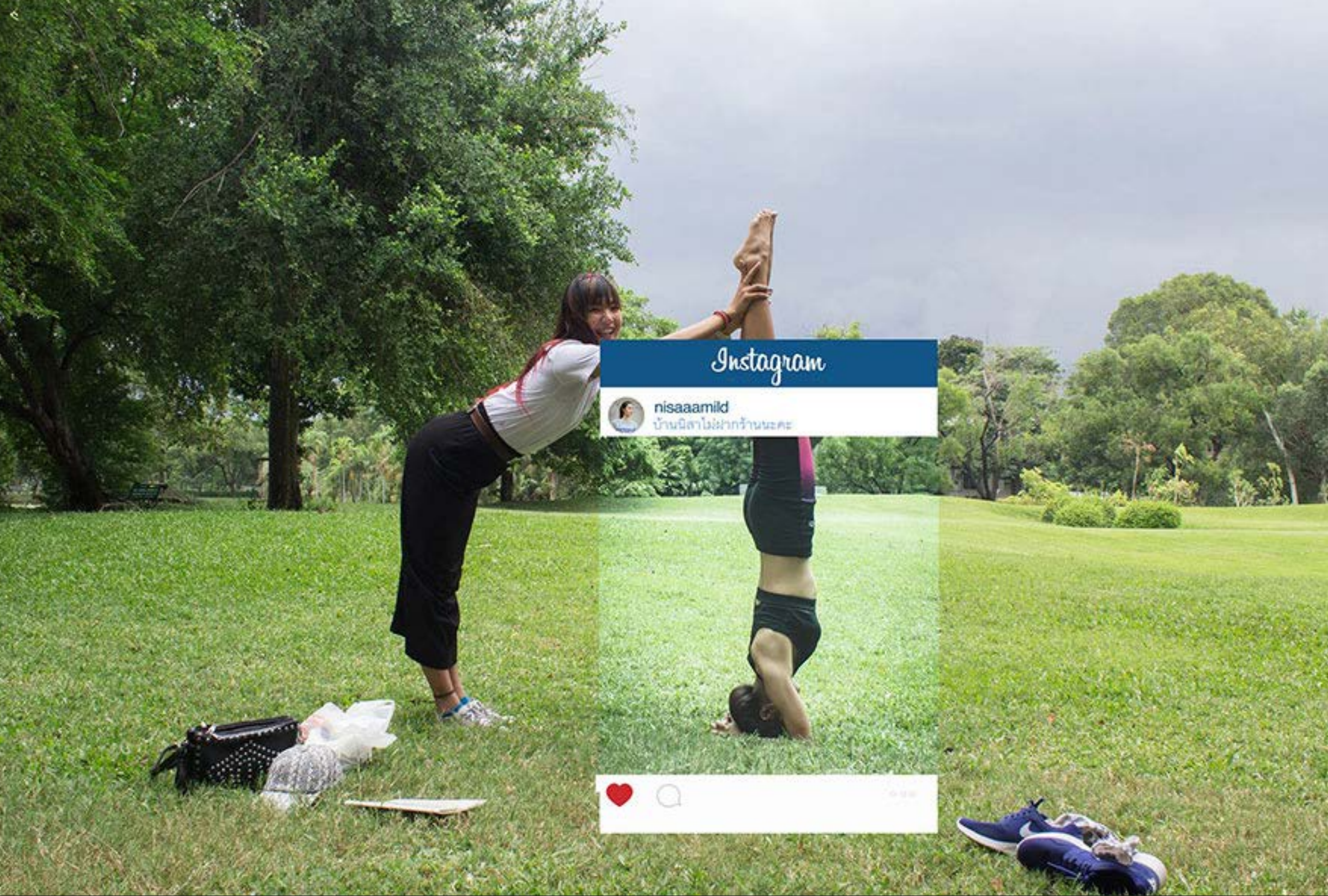


## DAVID LEE ROTH PULLING A SHIP IN THE JUNGLE

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1983





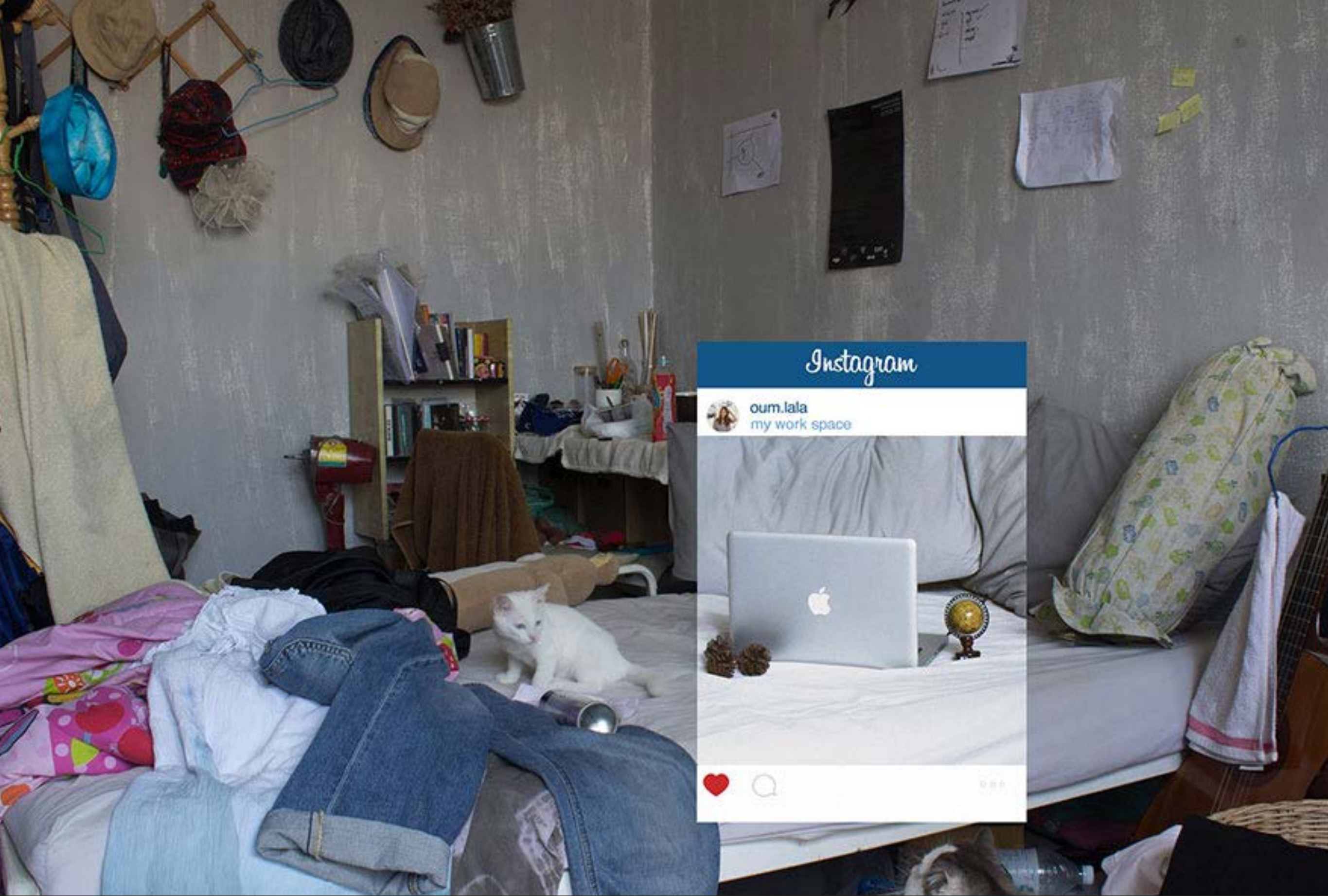
Instagram



**nisaaamild**  
บ้านนิสาไม่ออกกำลังกาย

❤️ 💬 1 Comment

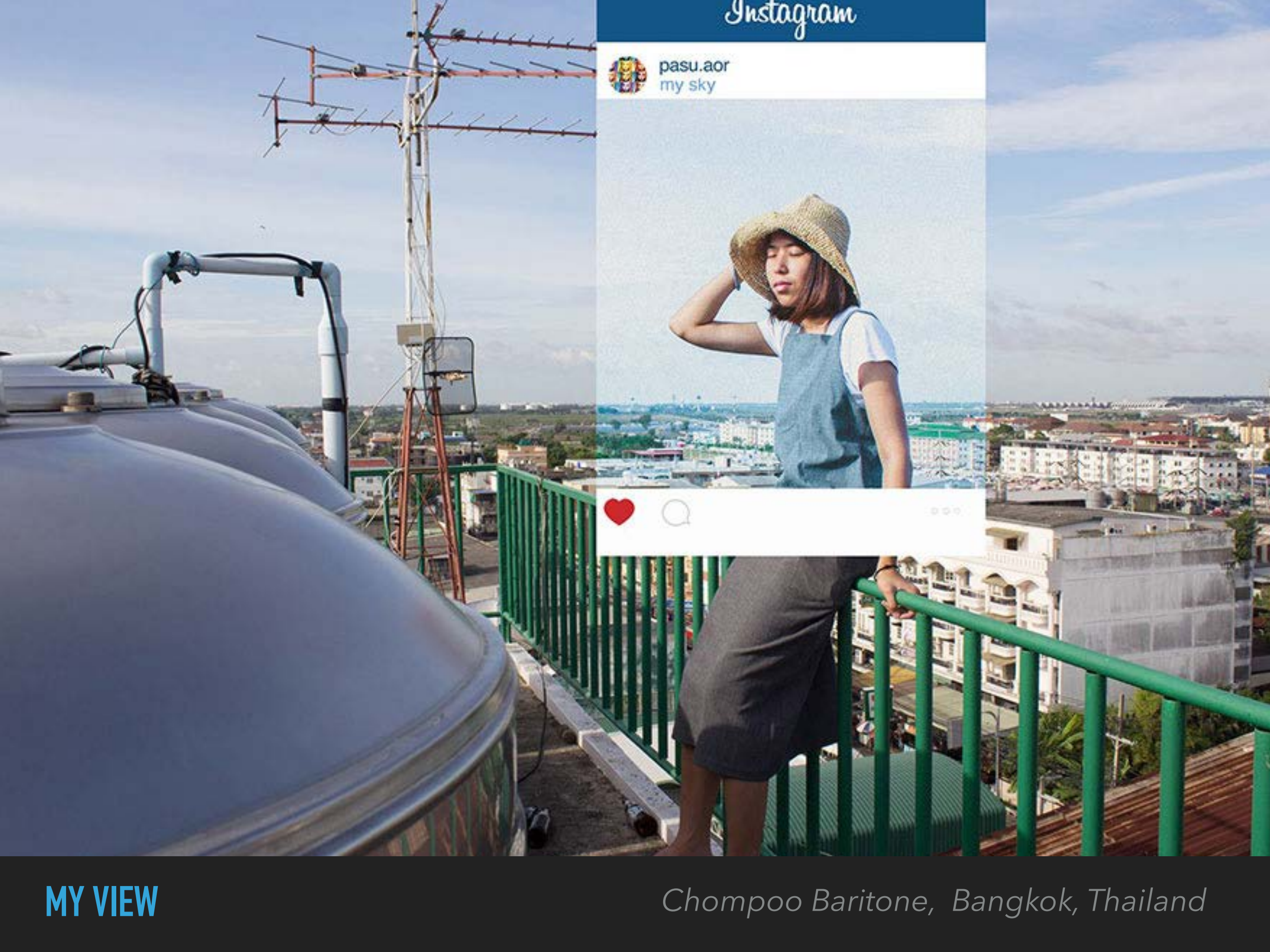




**MY WORK SPACE**

*Chompoo Baritone, Bangkok, Thailand*





Instagram



pasu.aor  
my sky



MY VIEW

Chompoo Baritone, Bangkok, Thailand



## ONE NEVER UNDERSTANDS ANYTHING FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

- ▶ Reason #3:
  - ▶ Photography can only give us knowledge of the world if we accept the world as we see it
    - ▶ This is the opposite of understanding
  - ▶ Photographs can give a mental picture, but hide more than they reveal
  - ▶ They require a narration for understanding





**A LIVE-FIRE TRAINING EXERCISE ON 2 JULY 2013  
IN LAGHMAN PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN**

*Hilda Clayton*





**PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURES A PHOTO OF THE MORTAR THAT KILLS HER**

*Hilda Clayton*

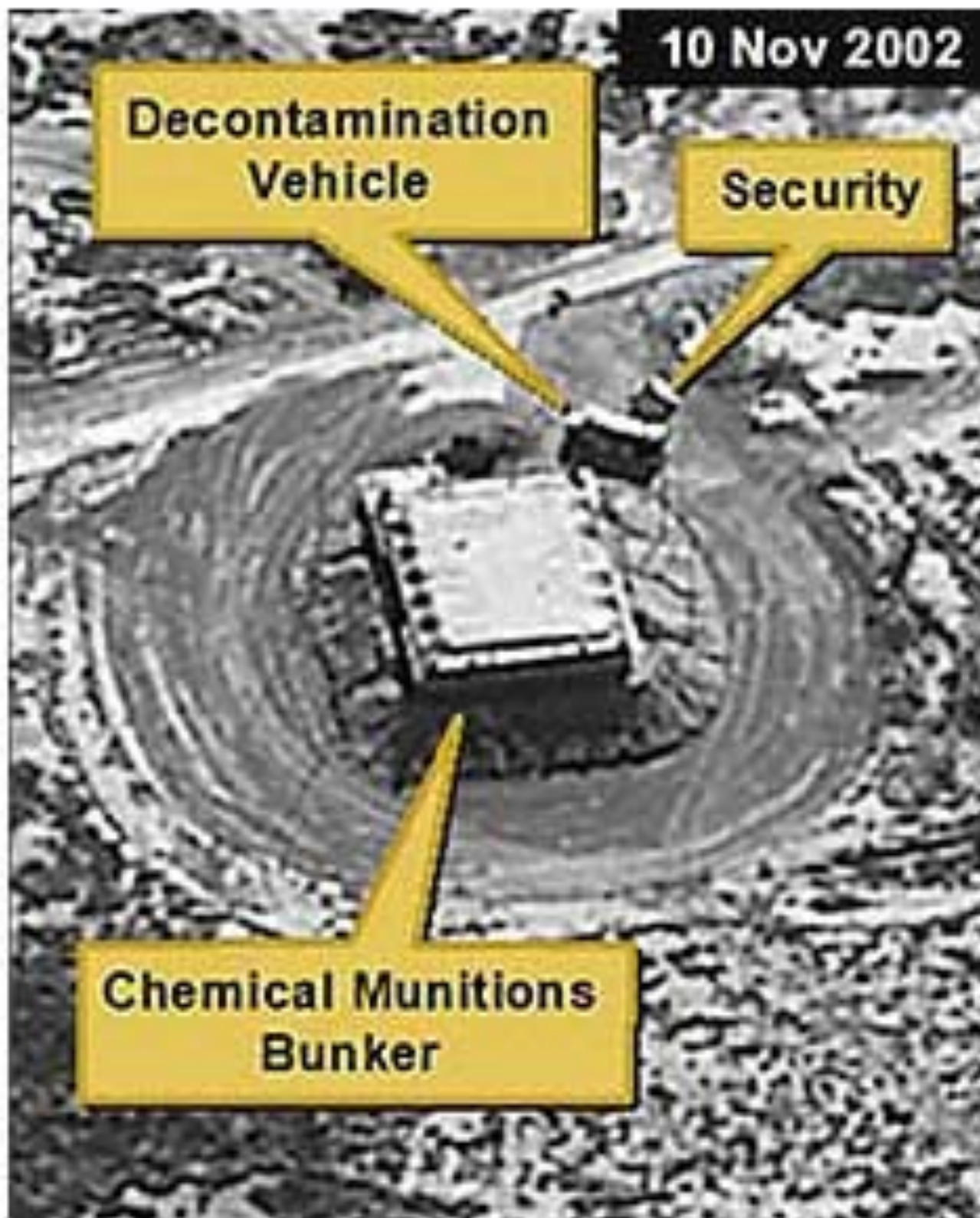




**SMOKE BILLOWS FROM STACKS AS MEN PUSH A TRICYCLE THROUGH A NEIGHBORHOOD NEXT TO A COAL-FIRED POWER PLANT IN NORTHERN SHANXI PROVINCE.**

*Kevin Frayer*









**28 DECEMBER, RESIDENTS OF IBI, SPAIN**

*Antonio Gibotta*



## ONE NEVER UNDERSTANDS ANYTHING FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

- ▶ Reason #4:
  - ▶ Photographs can arouse conscience, but it is only a semblance of ethical or political knowledge because it is always sentimental (prompted by feelings, whether it be cynical or humanist)









KC NOLAND

NIGHTLY NEWS

# TEENAGERS TAUNT ELDERS





**RACIST LIBERALS AND THEIR MEDIA ENABLERS SMEAR INNOCENT  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

2019



## ONE NEVER UNDERSTANDS ANYTHING FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

- ▶ Reason #5:
  - ▶ By duplicating the world in such a comprehensive way it has made the world seem more available than it really is







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Melrose Place

jeffgoldblum Into the Wild! @isabelmarant @atvottero #zebradad #zebradaddy #zaddy #didthat 🙏🔑🐎⚡❤️

Load more comments

la\_californienne Jeff! Your Tank needs some color 🌈 !!! 

katiechapman42 Remember when I said to take notes on his style - proceed to @ukiyoau 

benjaminja95 @tieganoneillx OKAY SO I'M JUST NOW SEEING THE COMMENTS WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU 

themfgk @neileatock 



179,888 likes

OCTOBER 18, 2018

Add a comment...







## REMOTE CULTURES

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*Kargi, Kenya  
by Ian Macharia*





**EXOTIC AND/OR DANGEROUS LOCATIONS**

*West Ridge of Pigeon Spire in Bugaboos,  
British Columbia, by Jonathan Bell*





**A BARBER'S SHOP IN OLD HAVANA**

*Tomas Munita*





**HUMPBACK WHALE WITH CALF NEAR KUMEJIMA ISLAND, JAPAN**

*Reiko, Takahashi*





**GEOMETRY OF THE SUN, TEOTIHUACAN, MEXICO**

*Enrico Pescantini*





**ALONE IN THE CROWDS, HONG KONG, CHINA**

*Gary Cummins*





**A QUIET STREET IN MACAU WITH MODERNIZATION AROUND**

*Paul Tsui*