KUNST PALAST

PRESS RELEASE December 2023

SIZE MATTERS
Scale in Photography
1 February–20 May 2024

Everything changes in an image when the zoom slider is adjusted: certain things are highlighted, detached from their context, exaggerated or reinterpreted. They move closer to us, allowing us to study them, or blur before our eyes. The scale of a pictorial subject or image format harbours great creative possibilities – but also the potential for manipulation. For the first time, an exhibition comprehensively examines the considerable yet often subtle shifts in meaning that accompany changes in size in photography. Works from the late nineteenth century to the present day raise questions about how scale affects our perception and handling of photographic images.

Photography can change its dimensions more easily than any other medium; pictures can be effortlessly blown up into large images on museum walls and billboards, or shrunk down to a thumbnail on a mobile phone screen. While photography traditionally reproduces the world in miniature, it can also present things in a life-size or even larger-than-life-size format and render the invisible visible.

"While painters have to determine the size of their canvas before applying the first brushstroke, photography is a medium without fixed measurements at the moment of its creation when the shutter is released. It is only afterwards that a decision is made about whether an image will materialise and, if so, in what dimensions," explains Felix Krämer, general director of the Kunstpalast. "A defining and unique feature of photography is that size is a mutable quality, which is something we want to highlight with this exhibition."

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Ever since the the projection print was invented and became established in the second half of the nineteenth century, and continuing on into the digital age, photography has been freely scalable – although this is subject to ever-evolving technical constraints, ranging from industrially manufactured paper dimensions to storage capacities.

Adjusting supposedly unaltered content to changing scales means that size often remains a latent quality in our perception of photographic images. Whether a motif has been scaled to fit on a billboard, museum wall, the page of a book or a mobile phone screen, to viewers the image often looks exactly the same.

From the avant-gardes of the 1920s to the present day, artists have continued to challenge the latency of size in photography. They use scale to liberate genres such as object or portrait photography from their functional purpose, as well as to detach items from their contexts in still lifes and imbue them with alternative meanings. They accentuate details in close-ups and create completely new perspectives. As an artistic tool and aesthetic principle, photographic scale possesses a unique power.

"Changes in size significantly influence the perception, use and impact of photographic images. They determine their target audience, their viewing context, their resolution, their portability, their monetary, cultural and social value – their meaning," explains Linda Conze, head of the photography collection at the Kunstpalast and curator of this exhibition. "Many subconscious expectations are attached to the size of photographic images: *big* equals important. At least in the museum space. On the street or in a teenager's bedroom, *big* might also signify ephemeral or mundane. A high resolution suggests high quality, while a lower-resolution image might be associated with the idea of authenticity."

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The exhibition explores the theme of photographic proportions through contrasts: historical and contemporary attempts to control the dimensions of the image are juxtaposed with deliberately distorted scales. Image formats designed for public space are contrasted with those intended for more intimate viewing. The functional use of scale is compared with its deployment as an aesthetic tool to turn a documentary image into a work of art. Enlargements for scientific research purposes are contrasted with those that go so far as to blur their subjects before the viewer's eyes. And small, individual JPEGs are displayed alongside vast data sets, the so-called "poor image" beside Big Data.

In the gallery context, a large photograph can symbolise exclusivity and a high market value. In the public space, it conquers distances and influences consumer decisions as well as political opinions. Small images serve as memory aids; historically, they could be worn close to the heart as a miniature daguerreotype or a tiny coloured albumen print in lockets or brooches and glued into photo albums. Now, they are carried around in our pockets as a thumbnail in the photo library of our smartphones. Whether in the form of a print or a compressed data set, small images can be collected and saved. They are easy to send as either a JPEG or postcard.

But when does a photograph become *big*, and when is it *small*? Size is always relative: it is determined by the relationship between images and the bodies of those who look at them; between images and other pictures, which can either eclipse or blend into each other in eyes of the viewer; between dimensions and the information they contain, which results in the sharpness or blurriness of this technical visual medium; and, last but not least, the relationship between images and reality.

For photography is still constantly measured against reality. Whether through scepticism or confidence, reality is a fixed point of reference in the reception of

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photographic images. Despite its historical reputation for being able to depict reality as it is, photography generally dramatically minimises things.

The medium creates miniatures and fiddles with the scale of the world, as Susan Sontag wrote in her groundbreaking essay "On Photography" (1977). In formats such as the photogram or the X-ray image, which are extremely rare in relation to photography as a whole, it presents things in their real size. Sometimes photography even enlarges its subjects, rendering things visible that cannot be seen with the naked eye, for example when it is combined with optical devices such as microscopes or telescopes. Photography is thus involved in the production of knowledge, promising the revelation of facts – only to lean towards fiction in the next moment and allow enlargements to veer into the unrecognisable or pure assertion. It is the simultaneity of the promise of reality and its dimensional flexibility that makes photography so influential in cultural, political and social contexts. Its scalability gives it the potential to adapt to a wide variety of social contexts and to establish a legitimacy within them.

The exhibition is based on the Kunstpalast collection, with national and international loans complementing the selection of works.

Artists: Bernd and Hilla Becher, Kristleifur Björnsson, Karl Blossfeldt, Georg Böttger, Katt Both, Renata Bracksieck, Natalie Czech, Jan Dibbets, Josef Maria Eder and Eduard Valenta, Leonard Elfert, Claudia Fährenkemper, Hanna Josing, Alex Grein, Andreas Gursky, Franz Hanfstaengl, Erik Kessels, Heinrich Koch, Jochen Lempert, Rosa Menkman, Duane Michals, Joanna Nencek, Floris M. Neusüss, Georg Pahl, Trevor Paglen, W. Paulcker, Sigmar Polke, Seth Price, Timm Rautert, Amanda Ross-Ho, Evan Roth, Thomas Ruff, August Sander, Adrian Sauer, Morgaine Schäfer, Hugo Schmölz, Karl-Hugo Schmölz, Katharina Sieverding, Kathrin Sonntag, Lucia Sotnikova, Simon

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Starling, Clare Strand, Carl Strüwe, Andrzej Steinbach, Julius Stinde, Anna Stüdeli, Wolfgang Tillmans, Moritz Wegwerth, René Zuber.

Accompanying the exhibition is a publication by Distanz Verlag featuring texts by Linda Conze, Tomáš Dvořák, Florian Ebner, Ellen Haak, Lilian Haberer, Vera Knippschild, Olivier Lugon, Vera Tollmann, Bettina Papenburg, Kathrin Schönegg, Anja Schürmann and Steffen Siegel.

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