

PRESS RELEASE

February 2026

COMMUNITY

Photography and Belonging

11 February – 25 May 2026

The family, the swimming club, the political collective: people have always formed communities. Yet community itself is not something we can directly see. Shaped by feeling, aspiration and assertion, it depends on images to take form. Photography does more than record belonging: it can generate it, reinforce it or place it under pressure. It makes visible what it means to be part of something larger, while also drawing lines of exclusion – who appears within the frame, and who is left out? Across nine thematic chapters, the exhibition probes this charged relationship, bringing applied and artistic photography into deliberate dialogue. Drawing on the Kunstpalast collection and complemented by significant loans, it brings together around 270 works to show, for the first time, how forms of collective life and modes of visual representation shape one another. The narrative extends from nineteenth-century group portraits to the digital image worlds of the present.

“Photography is one of the most influential social media – it has been since long before what we now call social media existed, and it remains so today,” says Felix Krämer, Director General of the Kunstpalast. “It creates closeness and shapes identity, while also revealing how fragile a sense of belonging can be. This exhibition shows just how deeply our ideas of community are bound up with images.”

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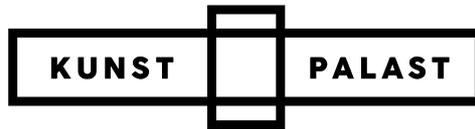
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The Group Portrait as Ritual: "This Is Us!"

Few photographic genres express belonging as clearly as the group portrait. From carefully staged nineteenth-century studio photographs to spontaneous group selfies taken in the present day, people position themselves in front of the camera, drawing closer and arranging their bodies to claim a place within the image. Whether families, circles of friends, professional groups or clubs: posing together becomes a ritual that signals connection. When such images find their way into albums, they become points of reference for remembering, storytelling and sustaining a sense of community.

At the same time, group photographs follow unwritten rules. Who stands at the centre, who lingers at the edge? Who is visible, and who is excluded? Such arrangements reveal hierarchies and power structures within a group. Six video works by Juliane Herrmann make this especially apparent: by filming groups as they organise themselves, she exposes processes of ordering and social negotiation. Historical and contemporary group portraits – from anonymous photographers and August Sander to Neal Slavin – further show that images of community not only reflect social relations, they actively help to shape them.

"What interests me about photography is its dual effect," says Linda Conze, curator of the exhibition and Head of the Kunstpalast Photography Department. "It makes people who appear together in an image seem naturally connected, while concealing those who are left out."

Co-curator Miriam Homer adds: "Seen side by side, the works show that the medium doesn't just depict community, but actively constructs it – through the selection, staging and arrangement of the people in the image."

Community Made Visible: "Who Belongs?"

Once a community has taken visual form, it can appear stable and secure. Yet photographs are open to alteration, reinterpretation and recomposition. From

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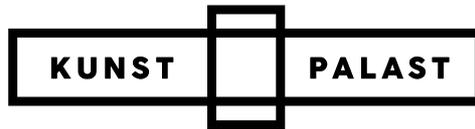
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cutting with scissors and complex montage techniques to the use of artificial intelligence, communities in images can be expanded, dissolved or conjured from nothing. Those absent at the moment a photograph was taken can later be made to appear; those no longer deemed to belong can disappear. And those who were systematically rendered invisible for long stretches of history can finally come into view. Omar Victor Diop disrupts the visual unity of white, middle-class group photographs from the 1960s by inserting himself into them as a Black artist. Mayara Ferrão uses artificial intelligence to stage queer couples within historical image contexts, proposing a utopian retrospective.

Photography thus emerges as a process rather than a fixed state, evolving through use. Interventions may be driven by emotion, pragmatism or politics, and range from the barely perceptible to the overtly confrontational. When group photographs are "tampered with", the dual nature of community – inclusion and exclusion – comes into especially sharp focus.

When Closeness Becomes Pressure: "Too Close. Community as a Burden"

Community is often idealised as a space of warmth and solidarity. Yet it can also become a burden, enforcing conformity, limiting self-determination or exerting social control. Many people belong to communities not by choice: they are born into families, religions or social classes. In institutions such as schools or care homes, the emphasis is not always on closeness, but sometimes simply on getting by.

Tensions within communal life surface in looks, gestures, postures and in the ways people occupy space. Photography can observe these situations discreetly, reflect on them from a personal perspective or sharpen them through critical distance. Moving between documentation and artistic experiment, this chapter shows that living together is not only comforting, but can also be demanding and restrictive.

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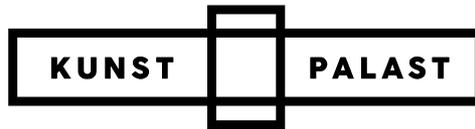
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A Village in Transition: "Alongside a Community"

One particularly compelling example of long-term engagement with community is the photographic portrait of the Thuringian village of Berka, developed over more than seventy years. Three photographers from the same family turned their attention to Berka at different moments in time. Shortly after the Second World War, Ludwig Schirmer, a master miller in the village, began documenting everyday life and local celebrations. Unaware of this earlier work, his son-in-law Werner Mahler completed his photography studies in 1978 with a series on Berka, returning in 1998 on commission for *Stern* magazine to record the changes following the fall of the Berlin Wall. After Schirmer's death in 2001, his daughter, the photographer Ute Mahler, discovered the negatives in his estate, made the first prints and later returned with a camera to the place of her childhood.

The diversity of the images reveals how rituals, communal spaces and forms of togetherness shift over time, while also bringing the role of the photographers into focus. Proximity and distance, a sense of belonging or an outsider's gaze all shape the narrative. Community emerges here not only in front of the camera, but equally in the relationship between those who photograph and those who are photographed.

Spaces of Encounter and Their Disappearance: "Community on Standby"

Community depends on places of exchange and, at times, of conflict: the playground, the café, the street – and today, the comment thread. How such spaces are designed shapes who uses them and how, reflecting broader social and political structures. When key sites of communal life become inaccessible, isolation and loneliness can take hold.

A work by Andreas Langfeld (b. 1984) presents public spaces in Düsseldorf and Cologne during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by uncertainty about the future. Barriers and markings enforce distance, while a harsh flash

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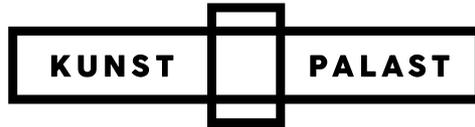
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accentuates emptiness and lends the scenes an unsettling atmosphere. Langfeld photographed during nocturnal walks and published the images the following morning on social media, where they sparked public dialogue. For an artist whose practice usually centres on people and collaboration, this became an involuntary yet productive shift – raising questions about what remains of a place without encounters, and where community relocates when shared spaces fall silent.

A Sense of “We” and Appropriation: “Becoming One”

Community is invoked at different scales, from the family and the village to the nation. Images in which the individual is visually absorbed into a mass often carry powerful symbolic force. Being part of a large crowd can generate an intense sense of “we”, even though those within it can never grasp the collective as a whole, perceiving it only in fragments. It is the photographic view from the outside that renders the crowd legible as a unified body.

This capacity to visualise mass experience in retrospect is mobilised in political contexts, popular culture and artistic utopias alike. Yet where faces blur and individual features dissolve, the image may promise equality while simultaneously exerting pressure to conform. A photograph taken in 1936 during the filming of *Olympia* by Leni Riefenstahl stages community as synchronised movement, visualising National Socialist ideals. In pointed contrast, Ramona Schacht dismantles Soviet propaganda images into detailed close-ups, exposing the mechanisms through which images construct the appearance of collective unity.

Visibility, Control, Surveillance: “One Among Many”

Photography can cause individuals to dissolve into a crowd, but it can also single them out and grant heightened visibility. Zoom, markings and facial-recognition technologies direct attention to particular people; often, it takes just

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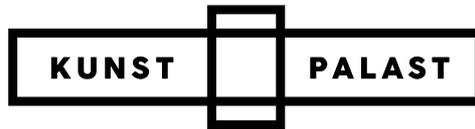
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one face for ideas of community to crystallise. Such emphasis can signal recognition, but it may also arise from suspicion. A press photograph from 1936 shows a crowd giving the salute to Adolf Hitler, with a single man refusing. His gesture initially went unnoticed, yet later became an icon of resistance. By breaking up the mass visually, photography makes social structures legible and allows presumed unanimity to be questioned. At the same time, this act of selection can also serve mechanisms of surveillance, stripping away anonymity and exposing individuals to control.

Against the Void: "Black Archive Germany"

With *Black Archive Germany*, the exhibition foregrounds a project that understands community as a practice of remembrance. The artist Cate Lartey collects photographic memories of African communities in Germany. Public calls bring together private photographs capturing moments of togetherness: family celebrations, holidays, parties. Dating from the 1970s to the 2000s, the images often enter the archive as scans or photographs of prints, as their owners are reluctant to part with the originals. These handovers become occasions for conversation and the sharing of stories. At the same time, the visual richness of the material throws another absence into relief: the limited presence of Black communities in Germany's cultural memory and in official archives. The project does more than address this gap; it opens up a space for exchange and connection in the present, one that cuts across geographical and generational boundaries. Here, too, photography emerges as a relational practice – shaped by people, technologies, institutions and histories, and carried forward in the gaze of those who encounter it.

More Connected Than Ever: "In the Network"

Never before have people been as interconnected as they are today. Digital networks enable real-time contact with those nearby as well as with people far

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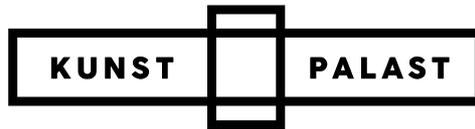
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away. Photographs play a particular role in this landscape: sharing them has become at least as important as appearing in them. Algorithms, too, shape what we see, hear and read online, recording and influencing our connections – sometimes grasping how we are linked more clearly than we do ourselves. The works in this chapter reflect on the networked nature of contemporary life and explore ways of representing it. They underline that forms of community are as mutable as the media through which they take shape.

Become Part of the Exhibition!

A dedicated section makes the idea of community at the Kunstpalast tangible from the outset – and continues to grow throughout the exhibition.

Düsseldorf-based clubs, institutions, businesses and fan groups responded to an open call, contributing historical and contemporary group photographs. Some images date back to the nineteenth century, pointing to long-standing traditions of association; others come from communities formed only recently. Together, they reflect the diversity of Düsseldorf's urban society, revealing change, cohesion and vitality over time.

With each new submission, the picture of community expands until the exhibition's close. Visitors, too, become part of this evolving constellation: at a photo spot within the exhibition, new groups can be formed and captured on the spot.

Artists featured in the exhibition:

Viktoria Binschtok | Marianne Brandt | Cihan Çakmak | Yvon Chabrowski | Omar Victor Diop & Lee Shulman | Bogomir Ecker | Mayara Ferrão | Anke Heelemann | Juliane Herrmann | Alfredo Jaar | Andreas Langfeld | Cate Lartey | Lilly Lulay | Ute & Werner Mahler | Ken Ohara | Heinrich Riebesehl | August Sander | Ramona Schacht | Ernst Schieron | Ludwig Schirmer | Richard Sides | Neal Slavin | Giorgio Sommer | Andrzej Steinbach | Marcel Top | Penelope Umbrico | Clemens von Wedemeyer | Amin Yousefi

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