

# What Remains

Barbara Diener, Pao Houa Her, Jon Rafman, Lieko Shiga

## KATJA STUKE + OLIVER SIEBER: YOU AND ME

January 26–March 22, 2015



**Barbara Diener** *Fire* 2012  
From the series *Sensucht* 2012-14  
Archival Pigment Print  
Courtesy of the artist

This guide serves as a viewer supplement to the concurrent exhibitions *What Remains* and *Katja Stuke and Oliver Sieber: You and Me* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, classroom activities, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from

the museum's website at [mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php](http://mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php). A PDF with images that can be projected for classroom use can also be found there. To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form here: <http://www.mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php>

The 2014–2015 exhibition season is sponsored by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, BMO Harris Bank and the Illinois Arts Council Agency. It is also partially supported by a CityArts Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. Generous support for *You and Me* is provided by the Goethe-Institut Chicago.

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# What Remains

## Introduction

Displacement—losing access to the places where one feels instinctively at home—is to become adrift in an unending negotiation between one's past and present selves. Exploring this phenomenon as one of the most unsettling of human experiences, the exhibition *What Remains* features four contemporary artists who contend with the psychic and physical aftermath of dislocation. In photography and video projects, these artists suture memories into their present narratives, expressing their individualized experiences of living with a fractured identity—one that must encompass

geographies and cultures separated by space and time in a unified self. Inherent in each artist's process is a search for continuity. Therefore, their work simultaneously considers both personal history and the social geography of the communities, subcultures, or families in which they currently live. Negotiating parallel worlds, these artists metaphorically inhabit a multiplicity of places that could never coexist in reality, but which find expression in photographic representation.

—Allison Grant



**Barbara Diener**  
From the series *Sensucht* 2012-14  
Archival Pigment Print  
Courtesy of the artist

In her series *Sehnsucht*, **Barbara Diener** (German, b. 1982) combines photography's unique capacity to render the world in high detail with its ability to reveal the complex human stories that lie beneath those surfaces. The project's title is a German word for unfulfilled and unattainable desire. With no English equivalent, it describes "one of life's longings, for someone or something, that cannot be fully defined and will not be realized." The title encapsulates Diener's experience as a German immigrant who moved to the United States in early

adulthood. By photographing rural towns throughout Illinois that recall her hometown in Germany, Diener has produced a photographic investigation of the complex meaning of home and the human need to feel deeply connected to a particular place. Diener's longing for the comfort of a place she can no longer access, only recollect, informs her understanding of a rural way of life found here in the United States, the spiritual and emotional undercurrents of which resonate in her photographs.



**Lieko Shiga**, from the *Rasen Kaigan* series 2008–12  
Archival Pigment Print  
Courtesy of the artist

**Lieko Shiga** (Japanese, b. 1980) began her project *Rasen Kaigan* as she traveled across Japan in search of a new place to live and make work. When she came across the small coastal city of Kitakama, she was drawn to the customs and traditions of the aging community she found there, most of whom were related and had spent generations on the land. Shiga shared a deep sensibility with these residents—with their physical and psychological ties to the land—becoming the official photographer of Kitakama and recording her subjects’ oral histories. Mid-project, the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami devastated the coastal town, which lies

just north of Fukushima Prefecture geographically. Many people’s possessions and personal photographs, including Shiga’s, were washed along the shore or lost at sea. *Rasen Kaigan* would change dramatically at this time, ultimately depicting the surreal, postapocalyptic vision of a real place and populace who have endured unthinkable tragedy. Informed by the question of what it means to no longer be able to live in one’s own home, Shiga would continue to photograph Kitakama, recording both the visible and the invisible, the place and its saga, as both the lived reality and fantasy of its inhabitants.



**Jon Rafman's** (Canadian, b. 1981) video *Codes of Honor* laments the effects of a dismantled physical place on a once thriving community. A video game enthusiast, Rafman spent years interviewing highly competitive gamers at New York's storied video game arcade, Chinatown Fair Arcade. CF, as it was often called by its patrons, was forced to close its doors in 2011 under financial pressures and rising rent. The loss of this venue precipitated the dismemberment of a community of gamers who regularly faced off in head-to-head combat there. Inspired by Rafman's time at CF, *Codes of Honor* blends techniques and sources from real and vir-

tual life, including interviews with pro-gamers, characters and architecture from virtual worlds, and scenes from the video games themselves. Partly fictional, partly autobiographical, the video nostalgically reflects a narrator's loss of purpose, solidarity, and achievement since giving up pro-gaming. By calling attention to the dominance of online worlds, which have all but replaced traditional arcades, the video explores the difficulties and new possibilities of finding self and connection in the contemporary technologically-driven universe.



**Jon Rafman**  
*Codes of Honor*, 2011  
HD video  
13:29  
Courtesy of Zach Feuer Gallery, New York



**Pao Houa Her**  
*Pears and Red Car*, 2009  
 Archival Pigment Prints  
 Courtesy of the artist

**Pao Houa Her's** (Hmong-American, b. 1982) work navigates the duality of her Hmong-American identity. A refugee from Laos, she moved to the United States with her family in 1987. Years later, Her would ask her mother about this uprooting. "We came here so that you wouldn't have to live the life we lived," her mother replied, though her parents continue to practice many traditions from their home country. Her's photographs are in part an attempt to recover aspects of the life her parents left behind, and also an exploration of the meaning of the American Dream for immigrant families and communities. Motivated by de-

sires to belong and to be recognized, Her uses the camera to delve into her own family's history, as well as into the experiences of Hmong veterans living in the US who fought for the CIA during the Vietnam War but who never received official recognition, and that of Laotian mail-order brides whose heavily Photoshopped pictures conform to ideals of beauty rooted in Western cultures. Questions of personal and cultural identity find their ephemeral answers in Her's photographs, where Hmong and American ways of life intersect.



# KATJA STUKE + OLIVER SIEBER: YOU AND ME



**Katja Stuke and Oliver Sieber**  
From the series *You and Me* 2014-2015  
Archival Pigment Print  
Courtesy of the artists

**Katja Stuke** (b. 1968) and **Oliver Sieber**'s (b. 1966) site-specific installation *You and Me* recreates the arduous journey of one woman from the war-torn former Yugoslavia. In 2013, German artist team Stuke and Sieber were at work on a project in Chicago, a visit that spurred Sieber's memories of his family's former housekeeper Indira. A Bosnian woman who had lived in Düsseldorf in the early nineties following the violent expulsion by Serbian nationalists of Muslims and Croats from their shared homeland, Indira was but one of over 300,000 refugees who sought asylum in Germany as the genocidal conflict erupted in the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Like many others, she would later emigrate to the US—eventually settling in Florida—when her official status as *Duldung* (the German word for tolerated) was revoked upon the war's end. The Bosnian genocide, which began in 1992 as a territorial conflict, would ultimately claim the lives of approximately 100,000 and lead to the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Curious about his family's former housekeeper, Sieber located her on Facebook, tracing Indira's personal history since arriving in the United States in 1999 as the instantiation of political and historical forces that exceed, but ultimately shape, the individual. Without direct access to Indira—who is represented in only a handful of the hundreds of photographs on view—Stuke and Sieber worked intuitively as they themselves followed her path of migration from Bosnia to Germany, then on to Bowling Green, Ohio and eventually Florida. Photographing what they saw and the people they met along the way, Stuke and Sieber evoke what they imagined Indira—or any refugee—might feel as they are dislocated from home. Using images to hint metaphorically at Indira's displacement or to provide historical context—such as those of the Holiday Inn hotel in Sarajevo that housed foreign journalists during the war—they tell a story that is as much about geopolitical realities as it is about Indira. At each location, the artists left something behind as physical evidence of

their and Indira's journey, such as a photograph they had made earlier of a Holiday Inn then posted on the wall of a different holiday Inn hotel room. Traveling north to south across the US to map Indira's journey, Stuke and Sieber connected key historical sites of the Civil Rights Movement—the Memphis hotel where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot in 1968—to the experience of refugees, who are similarly denied their human right to a safe and comfortable place to live. The artists draw from numerous sources, including popular culture, to tell Indira's story, captioning their images with song titles and news headlines from the time of the war.

In this sense, Stuke and Sieber's installation is at once a political, historical, and personal narrative. Along with photographs and videos, they have selected black-and-white "zines" containing background information on the war and country that Indira fled. Commissioned by the MoCP in partnership with the Goethe Institutes of Chicago and Sarajevo, Stuke and Sieber's *You and Me* (2014-15) is an exhibition exploring the intersections between the personal and political, self and others, diaspora and home, through Indira's story. As noted author Aleksandar Hemon puts it in his accompanying essay: [http://www.mocp.org/pdf/exhibitions/what-remains/YouAndMe\\_essay.pdf](http://www.mocp.org/pdf/exhibitions/what-remains/YouAndMe_essay.pdf)

*The fabric of history is what Katja Stuke and Oliver Sieber are photographing and Indira is their lens. The story of her remarkable, heroic, previously invisible life cannot be disentangled from the history of Bosnia, of Germany, and of the United States, nor from Oliver and Katja's story, nor, ultimately, from the story of any of the people they meet on their way to find Indira in her new Florida "home." Everything they see pertains to Indira; Indira pertains to everything they see; she refracts history.*

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## What Remains and You and Me

NOTE: *What Remains* and *You and Me* are separate exhibitions that both deal with issues of displacement and loss.

### Questions for Looking and Discussion

1. Look carefully at the image. What do you notice? What pulls your attention? Why?
  - If you are looking at a body of work, what do the images have in common?
  - What is the mood or feeling of the work? How is that conveyed?
  - Are there clues within the images that suggest when and where the work might have been made? Describe.
  - What can you tell about how the artist made this work? What do you notice about how it is presented and installed? Why do you think the artist made those choices?
  - Are there elements in the work that you think might have been directed or staged by the artist? Why do you think that?
  - What questions are raised for you in the work?
  - What do you think the artist was trying to communicate through this work? Why do you think that?

2. After you have spent some time responding to what you see or observe in each body of work read the statements that accompany the work. What if anything for you changes in the work with that additional information?
3. Each of the bodies of work in *What Remains* and *You and Me* suggests an autobiographical narrative.
  - What do you notice about how each artist created or evoked that narrative?
  - If you think of the images or in the case of *You and Me*, the parts of the installation like words in a sentence or sentences in a paragraph—what does each image or element add to the story?
  - What if anything do these narrative structures have in common? How do they differ?
4. The role that place and dislocation from place plays in identity is central to all of the bodies of work in these exhibitions. The four artists in *What Remains* contend with the psychic and physical aftermath of dislocation by either choice or force.
  - What do you learn about the place that is central to each body of work? How?
  - What are the sources of dislocation in each body of work? What in the work helps us to sense that dislocation?
  - What seems to be the impact of that dislocation on the artist or the subjects of the work? How do you know that?
5. Why do you think the curator of the exhibition Allison Grant chose the title *What Remains*?
6. Author Thomas Wolfe famously said in his 1929 novel *Look Homeward Angel* that “You can’t go home again.”
  - What do you think this quote might mean?
  - Read Aleksandar Hemon’s essay that accompanies the exhibition *You and Me*. What connections do you see between Hemon’s essay and Wolfe’s quote?
  - Consider Wolfe’s quote in connection to each of the bodies of work in *What Remains* and *You and Me*.
7. As they created the work in *You and Me*, a key concern for Stuke and Sieber was the idea of homelessness and leaving. They were aware that, like many refugees, Indira lacked the power to freely determine where she would settle and therefore never really settled anywhere. They said a fundamental question for them was “what is home?” and “what does one need to make a home?”
  - How would you respond to those questions? What is “home” to you? What do you need to make a home?



## Activities

### The Importance of Place

Each of the artists in the two exhibitions on view considers the role that place plays in our identity. Is there a particular place that you consider formative to your identity? Why is it important to you? Do you still have access to that place? What are the sights, sounds, smells, feelings and specific memories that you associate with that place? How could you evoke those qualities through images? If you were to create a series of ten images to teach others about that place and its importance to you, what would you photograph? How? Sketch or write about the images you would make. If time allows, make those pictures.

#### A. Fictional Backstory

Each of the bodies of work on view suggests a backstory related to people and place. Part of what inspired Stuke and Sieber to create *You and Me* is the thought that the people around us, whose lives connect to ours in small or big ways, often have interesting stories that we might know nothing about. Sit in a public place. Observe the people around you. Pick someone who interests you and observe them for a few minutes making notes on your observations. Write a fictional backstory for this person. What might this person have been doing two hours or two years ago? Give them a name. Where might they live? How do they spend their time? How might they have come to be in the location you found them in? Weave these thoughts into a brief story.

#### B. Personal Backstory

The artists in *What Remains* create images that provide clues into their own back stories. Write a back story of your own life. Select three moments from your own life that would provide insight into who you are today. What was happening at those points? Where were you? What sights, sounds, and feelings do you associate with those memories? Why were those events formative to you? Craft those thoughts into a short essay.