



VIVIANE SASSEN: UMBRA

January 26 - April 1, 2017

Viviane Sassen, *Nadir*, 2007

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *UMBRA* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php.

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Introduction

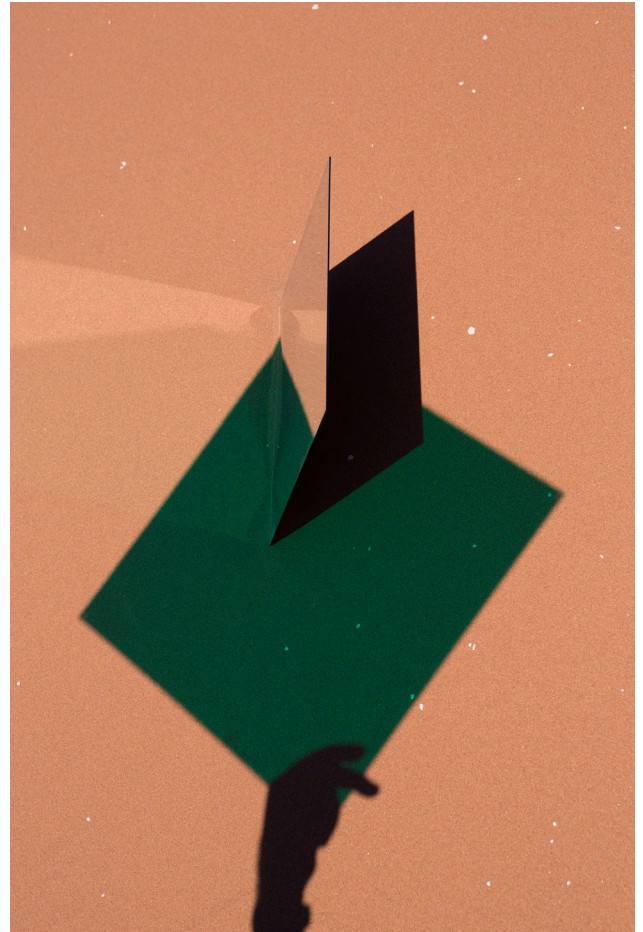
Viviane Sassen (Dutch, born 1972) studied fashion design and photography before receiving an MFA from Ateliers Arnhem, the Netherlands. Some of her earliest memories are of life in Kenya, where she spent three years as a child. When her family returned to the Netherlands in 1978, Sassen was troubled: “I didn’t feel like I belonged in Europe, and yet I knew I was a foreigner in Africa,” she says. Ten years later, at age sixteen, Sassen revisited Kenya, and she has been traveling and working in Africa ever since. Her home base is in Amsterdam.

In the second half of the 1990s, a time when the boundaries between fashion and art had been re-negotiated, Sassen became interested in new ways of telling stories with photography. She started working for underground zines like *Re-Magazine* and other publications that conflated fashion and art, such as *Purple*, *i-D*, and *Dazed & Confused*. One of the first artists to focus on the expression of cultural diversity in fashion photographs, Sassen took an experimental approach. She moved away from classical ideas about beauty and the central role of the fashion model and opted for formalist compositions executed in harsh sunlight.

Sassen has forged an international career in fashion photography, but she belongs to a generation of image makers that don’t make firm distinctions between personal, commercial, and editorial work. For her, photography is nearly always personal. She mentions the American artist Nan Goldin and the Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki as two artists whose intimate approaches have inspired her.

Sassen keeps a broad view on things. She is knowledgeable about art history and well aware of current developments in fashion and photography, but her work is equally informed by international contemporary art. The unclassical poses of her models relate to contemporary dance and performance.

Typical of Sassen’s style are the abstract elements in her photographs, often including intertwined bodies, geometrical shapes, lush colors, and expressive shadows. Her work is visually tantalizing but also has a psychological depth that recalls surrealism, with references to mental disorientation or disorder, and even death. Although her personal history and memories play a role in everything she makes, her work expresses an uneasiness and anxiety that evoke emotions associated with contemporary life. Also timely are her experiments with abstraction in photography—right now, when so many artists are questioning the medium’s traditional boundaries.



Viviane Sassen, *Axiom G03*, 2014

UMBRA is perhaps Sassen’s most personal work thus far. Conceived as an installation piece with seven different chapters, each with a distinct character, it contains various media such as photography, video, drawing, poetry, light projection, mirrors, and sound. A number of works were made especially for this installation; others Sassen selected from her extensive archive.

Formally speaking, some of the series presented in *UMBRA* refer to abstract painterly traditions that include artists like Kazimir Malevich (whose *Black Square* painting from 1915 she greatly admires), Piet Mondrian, or Mark Rothko. In other ways the installation refers to literary, scientific, and philosophical traditions, from Plato and Carl Jung to the young Dutch poet and writer Maria Barnas, who wrote poems to accompany *UMBRA*.

Sassen takes visitors on a journey through light and shadow, even bringing their physical presence into the dream world that she has created with *UMBRA*. In *TOTEM*, for instance, projected large-format shadows of human figures move along the walls. Here, the visitor’s presence becomes visible through mirrors and the shadows created by walking through the projector’s light beam. Image and reality mingle, as if the visitor-viewer were lost in Plato’s cave. What is reality, the visitor might ask, confused.

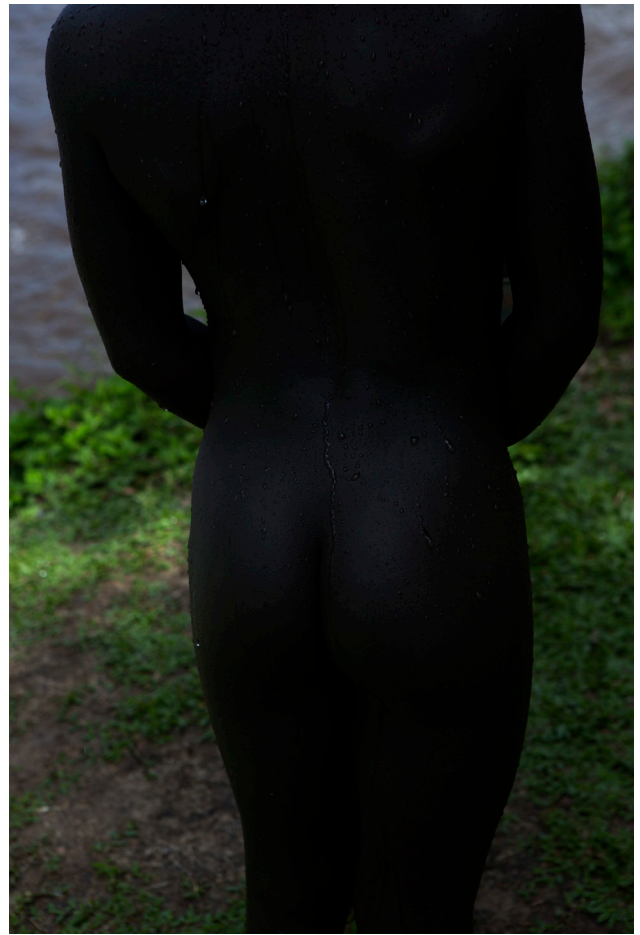
Who am I, and who is the Other? As the journey continues, the visitor encounters similar questions about identity, one's inner world, and private fears. *LARVAE* is an associative translation of the archetype of the Shadow, as explained in the writings of psychoanalyst Carl Jung. According to Jung, each of us has a dark side to our conscious or unconscious mind. This "shadow side" is the repository of the things that embarrass or frighten us, things that we would rather conceal. *HURLING* consists of a sign language performance of a poem of the same name by Maria Barnas. The hands are those of a deaf South African called Dawid Petro. Here, the word becomes image. Black ink on white paper becomes a shadow in reverse.

Drawings and photographs in various materials give visual expression to thoughts about death in the most personal part of *UMBRA*, called *SOIL*, about mourning a loved one. Small and fragile images of a hole in the ground, empty spaces, silhouettes, and forms that could be graves or coffins symbolize sadness, grief and bewilderment.

Yet Sassen's message is also hopeful. Ultimately, *UMBRA* may offer the visitor an experience of catharsis—the purification of emotions after sadness and fear—as many sections contain intertwined bodies, geometrical shapes, lush colors, and expressive shadows that evoke one of the driving forces of human life: play.

Frits Gierstberg

Curator, Nederlands Fotomuseum



Viviane Sassen, *Venus*, 2014

Viviane Sassen has created campaigns for MiuMiu, Adidas by Stella McCartney, Bottega Veneta, Paul Smith, and Hermès, among others. Her work has been widely published and included in the exhibitions *New Photography* (2011) at the Museum of Modern Art, *The Encyclopedic Palace* during the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), and numerous others. In 2012, Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography in Amsterdam, organized an extensive exhibition of Sassen's fashion work under the title *In and Out of Fashion* that traveled to Edinburgh (GB), Savannah (Georgia, US), Frankfurt (DE), and Winterthur (CH).

Sassen won the Prix de Rome in 2007 and the Infinity Award of the International Center of Photography in 2011. In 2015 she was shortlisted for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize.

In collaboration with renowned Dutch graphic designers such as Sybren Kuyper and Irma Boom, Viviane Sassen published a number of cutting-edge photobooks, including *Parasomnia*, *Flamboya*, *Pikin Slee*, and *UMBRA*.

Viviane Sassen is represented by Stevenson gallery, Capetown, South Africa.

The exhibition *UMBRA* was commissioned by the Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and curated by Viviane Sassen in collaboration with Frits Gierstberg and Hugo Timmermans.

The installation in this gallery is called **REBUS**. It is one of seven chapters in **UMBRA**, an exhibition that takes its title from the Latin word for the darkest part of a shadow.

Ask students to begin by describing the color, composition, and scale of the artworks around them. What comes to mind when they look at individual works? How about when looking at the entire room?

After sharing their initial impressions, ask students to consider the title of this section of the exhibition. Why might the artist have chosen it? A rebus is, according to the British Dictionary, “a puzzle consisting of pictures representing syllables and words; in such a puzzle the word hear might be represented by H followed by a picture of an ear.”

- As the title *REBUS* suggests, this installation is designed so that viewers can piece together various associative meanings while standing in the gallery. Many of the artworks in this room contain fragments of the human body or items isolated in the landscape. Through these parts, Sassen leaves the interpretation of her artworks open-ended and allows their meanings to be reconfigured by viewers in innumerable ways.
- To what extent can students “read” the rebuses presented here? Can these representations be put together to signify something specific? How is each student’s read of the artworks alike or different?

When Sassen discusses her photographs, she often talks about the influence of her family’s relocation when she was a child, which is described by exhibition curator Frits Gierstberg in an essay for this exhibition.

Some of [Sassen’s] earliest memories are of life in Kenya, where she spent three years as a child. When her family returned to the Netherlands in 1978, Sassen was troubled: “I didn’t feel like I belonged in Europe, and yet I knew I was a foreigner in Africa,” she says. Ten years later, at age sixteen, Sassen revisited Kenya, and she has been traveling and working in Africa ever since.

Her home base is in Amsterdam.

- Frits Gierstberg

- Can students sense the impact of Sassen’s own experience of dislocation in her work? How?
- Does the work have a sense of place? Are there visual clues that let you know where the photographs were made? What might the indicators of place, or lack thereof, say about the artist’s personal history? What might it say about human experience?



Viviane Sassen, *Raging*, 2013

The images in *REBUS* are meant to be reminiscent of the concept of fate. The gallery wall text elaborates, “Sometimes, the events in our lives spiral out of control and our whole future is turned upside-down. We feel confused; it is as if fate is playing with us or playing tricks on us; it wants to show us what’s what. We feel as though we are being dealt cards we can’t understand: a puzzle with no visible solution.”

- Ask students if they think a concept as intangible as fate can be depicted. How does knowing Sassen’s intentions change her work?

The photographs in **CARBON** use shadow to obscure portions of each image in even more pronounced ways than **REBUS**.

In real life, the human eye would gradually adapt to the lack of light in the scenes photographed, but Sassen's photos scarcely reveal their content. [Sassen's] attempt to photograph what is shrouded in darkness in fact produces the opposite: photographs of shadow itself. In that respect, the lack of light creates scope for a yearning for and curiosity about the unknown. The darkness acts as a mirror for our personal fears, dreams and fantasies.

- Frits Gierstberg

- Ask students to discuss their experience of looking at the images in this gallery. How do shadows in photographs look similar to or different from real life? What tensions do the shadows bring to our viewing experience? Do these photographs function as illusions that appear to be a window into another space, as many photographs do, or do they feel flattened and more two-dimensional?
- How do students interpret the lack of detail in these images? Do students agree that the, "darkness acts as a mirror for our personal fears, dreams and fantasies?"

Carbon is an element that, in its pure form, is usually deep black in color. It is among the most abundant elements on earth and is found in all organic matter. Is carbon a metaphor? What for?

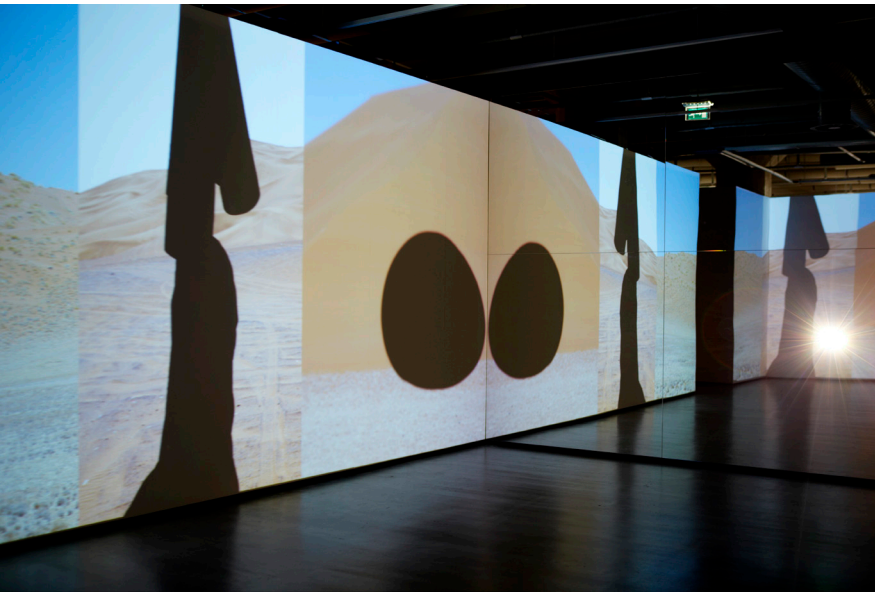
- There are many answers to this question, though it is worth noting that the concept of carbon, and of shadow, can lead to opposing conclusions.

- On one hand, the concepts of carbon and shadow could be seen to represent infinite possibility and acknowledge the mysterious depth of knowledge that lies beyond human perception.
- Conversely, carbon or shadow can be interpreted as emptiness, a void that lacks content or possibility.

- These competing forces—of limitless complexity and emptiness—appear throughout Sassen's work and their tension is a part of the philosophical questions that this exhibition seeks to raise.



Viviane Sassen, *Book*, 2014



The images in *TOTEM* glide slowly by, unfolding a narrative about the archetypal or original form of the human shadow: a silhouette on the horizon. Upright man, Homo Erectus, is an ambiguous element in this interactive installation. As viewers move through the space, their shadows interrupt projections, merging together and drifting apart from projected shadow figures.

- Give students a few minutes to walk through the space. What is it like to see their bodies interact with the projected images?
- How do the mirrors installed in the gallery impact the experience of standing in the space?

Viviane Sassen, *TOTEM*, projectors and mirror, 2014

Sassen created *TOTEM* in part as a way of considering Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave*, which appears in his book *The Republic* (514a–520a). The allegory describes prisoners who have been chained inside a cave for their entire life, and can see passersby only as shadows cast on the wall in front of them. The shadows are the prisoners' only reality.

- In her book *On Photography*, theorist Susan Sontag compares Plato's Cave to the imprint that photographs have on human perception. Like shadows, photographs offer only a fragment of the reality they correspond with, and lead us to a particular sense of the truth that may not account for a larger reality that exists beyond what we can see.
- Beyond presenting a limited view, Sontag argues that photographs reformulate our awareness of the objects and situations that surround us. She writes, "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."

Ask the students, are we capable of photographing reality as it really is? How do real shadows and representations blend and become indistinguishable in this piece?

- o Sontag asserts that photographs tell us how to look at the things they depict. Pictures inform how we see ourselves and the world around us.
- o Considering Sontag's quote, explain to students that Sassen is also interested in the role of vision and photography in forming the concepts of self and other. In this installation, she wonders, can we recognize our own shadows, or do we see only the shape of the Other, an anonymous entity that is the visual expression of xenophobia (our fear of what we see as foreign or strange)?



Viviane Sassen, *Zone 01*, 2014

Do students think representations inform what and who we think is familiar, and who becomes foreign or other to us? How is the concept of self and other challenged in this piece?

Begin by asking students to look at the images in *LARVAE*.

What do they notice? What draws their attention?

- Students may notice the bodies of subjects are fragmented, faces are obscured, and many images employ unconventional or imperfect camera techniques. Why might the artist be using photography in this way?
 - o As in other works in this exhibition, Sassen does not use photography to point at an object, place, or person directly. Rather, she is interested in reflecting on the act of looking and perception, and the imperfections of translating reality through imagery, vision, and memory.

Sassen's installation *LARVAE* is an associative translation of the archetype of the shadow as explained in the writings of psychoanalyst Carl Jung. According to Jung, each of us has a dark side to our conscious or unconscious mind. This 'shadow side' is the repository of the things that embarrass or frighten us, and which we would rather conceal. The images in this series tend to refer to corporeal and sexual aspects of the psyche; they allude in a poetic and associative way to things like our primal urges and animal passions: the blind larvae within us.

After explaining Sassen's intentions, ask students if they see aspects of the 'shadow side' of the psyche in these images? How? Can this part of the unconscious mind be represented through photography? Or through other forms of representation? How does Sassen use the body and other props to represent aspects of the known and unknowable self?

- Instructors may wish to note that this section, as in other portions of the exhibition, attempts to challenge simplistic reads of photographic imagery. Sassen is using the camera as a tool to consider the relationship between external vision and the internal self. Carl Jung writes; "Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes." Sassen is asking the viewer to look within, to question the surface read of a photograph as she attempts to awake aspects of our inner being.



Viviane Sassen, *Red Leaves*, 2013



Viviane Sassen, *Watermelon*, 2014

HURLING is a video showing a sign language performance of a poem of the same name by **Maria Barnas**. The hands are those of a deaf South African named Dawid Petro. The word becomes image, inscribed by the movements of his two hands. Black ink on white paper is replaced by a shadow in reverse: white shapes on a black background.

- Dutch visual artist and poet Maria Barnas collaborated extensively with Sassen as she prepared the exhibition and publication *UMBRA*. She writes:

Viviane approached me to write on shadows. She was collecting existing work and making new work for her exhibition UMBRA in the Fotomuseum, Rotterdam. She showed me the sketches for her exhibition, some beautiful drawings, and some already finished works. Also she shared with me her own connections, memories, references to shadow, very generously. I really felt I entered a territory in which my own shadows merged into those of Viviane – and then somehow it was as if the shadow of humankind – no longer strictly a personal darkness, began to speak and manifest itself. I wrote in a way that was beyond simply writing about specific images, helped significantly by the open nature of Viviane’s work, which provoked all kinds of shadows.

- How is the experience of watching the piece different from reading the poem as text?
- Most students will be unable to read the sign language presented. What purpose do they think showing sign language serves?
 - Instructors may want to point out that Sassen’s video brings attention to the role of various senses in communicating and translating human experience, particularly sight and hearing. Though we often imagine reality to be a singular experience, here Sassen asserts that in fact, each person has different sensory capabilities that come together to translate the world in ways specific to the individual, not universal to all of humankind.
- Barnas’s poem addresses death and the afterlife. Ask students if they think Sassen has addressed this concept visually in her video piece.

HURLING

Turn me into a diamond when I die
I flung out at someone sitting across the table
letting the words trail behind me as exuberant

silk around the neck of Grace Kelly in an open car
as she plunged into death full color.
The hall in which we dined slowly turned

around us and then narrowed faster around me.
It whirled a mad merry-go-round and I laughed
and twirled until the tables and people

became fluttering napkins. Small hearts
in tightening chests grey of revolving
and I closed my eyes, turning slow

black pupils into a hollow skull.
I fell in clear black.
It was cold space cold as glass in which I fell freely.

Free from weight. Free from clouds and gazes.
Free, astonishingly, from time
and I knew this is death and all.

(Remember: the spindly tree that rose up
from a field straight as the spine of a child
as you followed its rising branches

reaching for the sky with squinted eyes.)
I know it is the universe that is pulling
and I try to tell the person across the table

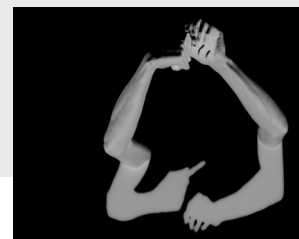
not to worry about the diamond
my ashes are of no importance
compressed or not who cares

between raging comets and stars
there are no words and besides I am plunging.
I do not have a voice to yell.

Maria Barnas, 2014

Viviane Sassen, HURLING, 2014

Instructors can preview *HURLING* online at the following link: <https://vimeo.com/106268075>



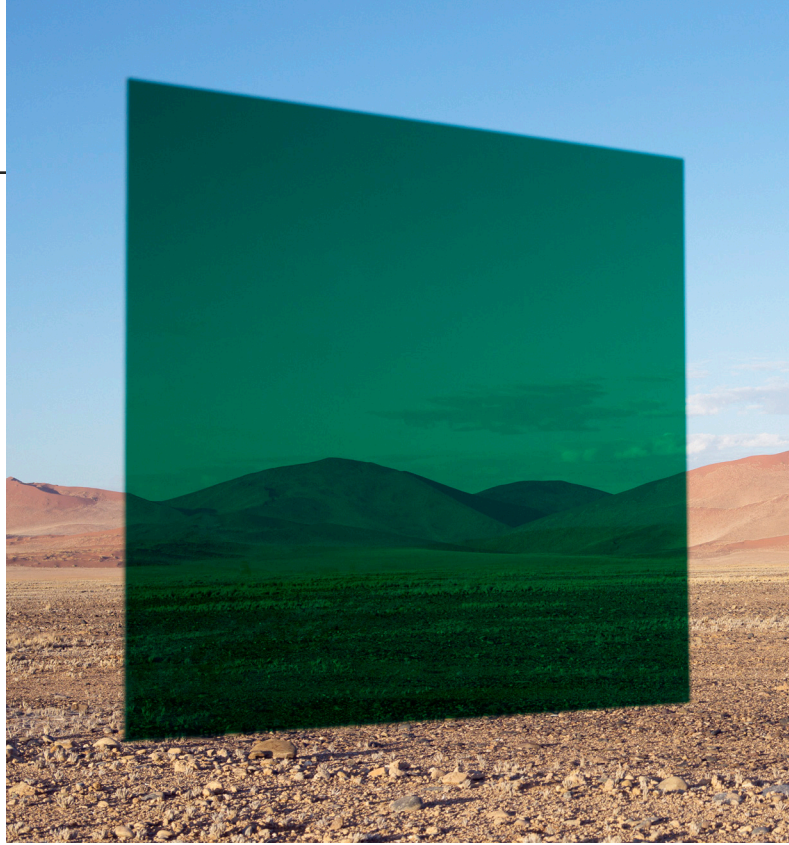
Mezzanine / AXIOM

Have students react to the works in **AXIOM**. How do these works differ formally from other works in the show?

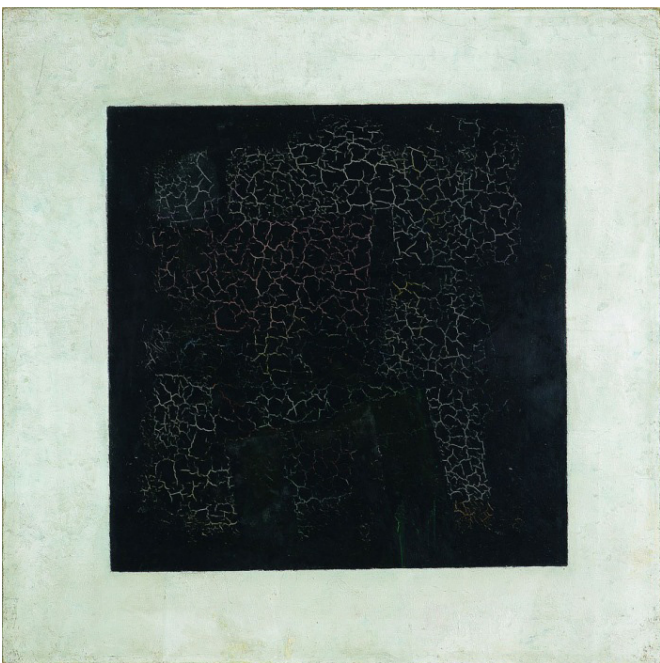
The photographs in *AXIOM* are the result of a challenge Sassen posed to herself. She wanted to attempt to produce a photographic interpretation of her favorite work of art: the renowned painting *Black Square* (1915) by Russian artist and art theoretician **Kazimir Malevich** (1879-1935).

I think it's wonderful how [Malevich] has expressed, and even overcome, the problem of ultimate emptiness in such a simple way; he defuses Darkness by placing it in a simple framework. There you are; the whole goddamned Void captured and reduced to human proportions in one fell swoop, there for us to admire, to contemplate and to mirror ourselves in. His painting enables us to gaze safely into the darkness.

- Viviane Sassen



Viviane Sassen, Top: *Green Vlei*, 2013, Bottom: *Yellow Vlei*, 2013

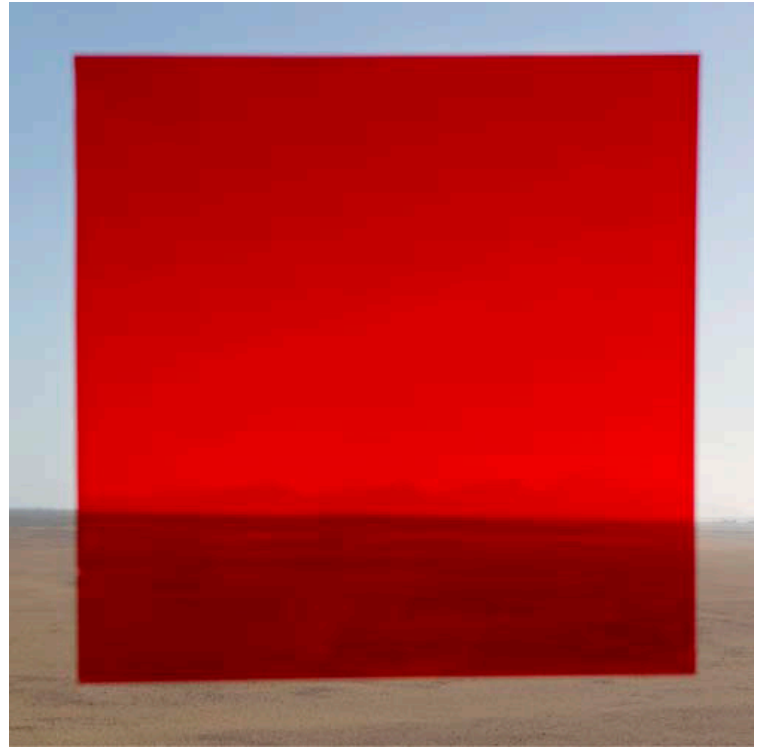


Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, oil on linen, 1915

Kazimir Malevich founded the art movement Suprematism around 1913 with the intention of promoting abstract art that prioritizes, "the supremacy of pure artistic feeling," rather than the representation of objects. The movement focused on basic geometric forms, such as circles, squares, lines, and rectangles, painted in a limited range of colors.



Mark Rothko, *Orange, Red, and Red*, oil on canvas, 1962



Viviane Sassen, *Red Vlei*, 2014

Comparably, **Mark Rothko's** color fields create perceptual encounters with paint on canvas. *AXIOM* was also inspired by Rothko. The Whitney Museum of American Art describes Rothko's belief, "that [the] abstract perceptual forces [in his paintings] had the ability to summon what he called "the basic emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, and doom." The artist further explains, "If you . . . are moved only by . . . color relationships, then you miss the point."

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AND DISCUSSING

- Do students see a link between Sassen's work and the art historical references she cites? Do Sassen's works call forward basic emotions similar to those described by Rothko?
- How do the fields of color in Sassen's photographs function compared to Rothko's or Malevich's paintings?
- What photographic strategies has Sassen used in her attempts to transcend mere representation in these works? Do students think those strategies are effective? How do they react emotionally when seeing these works?
- Ask students to consider the title *AXIOM*. Why might the artist have chosen it? An axiom is a truth that is self-evident and requires no evidence of its factuality.

In *SOIL*, an installation of drawings and photographs gives visual expression to thoughts about death.

This highly personal series is about mourning a loved one. It expresses sadness, grief and bewilderment. The earth into which the body disappears, never to return again.



Viviane Sassen, *Fingersheet*, 2014



Viviane Sassen, *Coil*, 2014

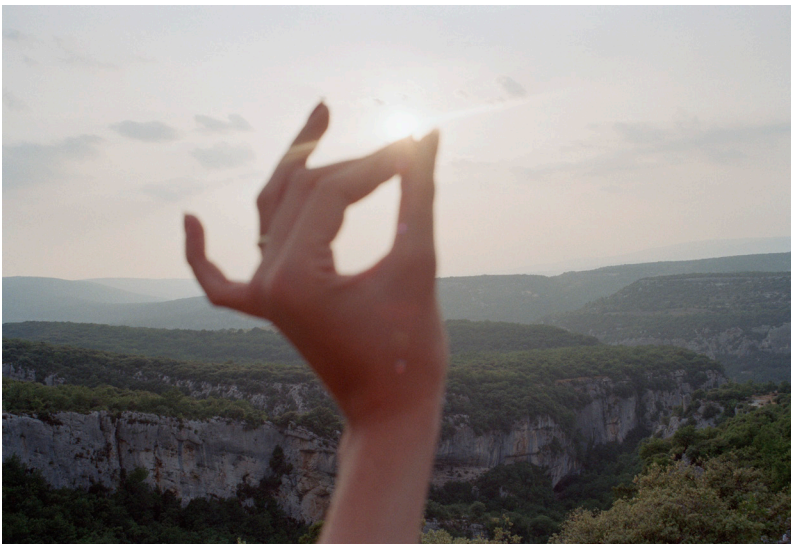


Viviane Sassen, *White Grave*, 2011

Compare and Contrast

After visiting the *UMBRA* exhibition, have students spend time looking through Viviane Sassen's book with the same title. In groups, have students write at least three similarities and differences between their experiences with the work in the gallery, and in the book. Students can then share their initial impressions. Questions to guide further discussion:

1. How has the artist married the formal execution of the book with the concepts she is attempting to communicate, such as the visible versus the obscured?
2. Is this monograph like other photography books students have looked at? What makes this book distinct?
3. What role does tactility play in the book? Touch is usually a sense that is minimally involved when looking at photographs. How does the book's construction and progression emphasize the physical involvement of a reader's body?



Viviane Sassen, *Pappie*, 2014



Viviane Sassen, *Justus Y*, 2013

VIVIANE SASSEN: UMBRA

January 26 - April 1, 2017

Extended Resources

Maria Barnas, *Twee zonnen*, (Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam, 2003).

Mary Dougherty, "On Articulating Affective States Through Image-Making in Analysis," *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, <https://aras.org/sites/default/files/docs/00048Dougherty.pdf>.

Viviane Sassen, *Viviane Sassen: UMBRA*, (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2015).

Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," *On Photography*, (London: Allen Lane: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978), 3-24.

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