

**VIVIANE**

PHOSPHOR

# SASSSEN

PRESTEL

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EVERYTHING IS TRANSFIXED,  
ONLY THE LIGHT MOVES  
Clothilde Morette

It may seem strange, perhaps even inappropriate, to introduce a book by referring to a previous one. In this case, however, I feel it is necessary to take this detour, as it was through that earlier book that I discovered Viviane Sassen's work, just over ten years ago. On the cover, a young man, with his arms wide open and his body immersed in murky water, caught my eye. I leafed through the pages, and began to read the introductory text before heading to the checkout to pay for my purchase; and that's how *Parasomnia* (2011) ended up on my bookshelf. I have spent a long time with the photographs it contains and, along with Nan Goldin's *The Other Side* (1993), it is probably the photobook which I have re-opened most often, the one I've been most absorbed in and that has somehow continued to carry me away.

I've taken this tangent to talk about Viviane Sassen's work because I have the feeling that part of her talent lies in creating images that are resistant to what could be thought of as an "exhaustion" of the gaze. You can literally spend hours looking at her photographs, over and over again, and always discover something new within them. There are the young teenagers embracing, with a banana leaf between their two bodies that seems to separate them as much as it unites them; there are the lit candles planted on a mound of ochre earth; and there is a patch of vegetation whose vibrant colours seem, paradoxically, to be consumed by darkness.

Sassen's works speak of the complexity of the gaze and the inherent ambiguity of images. Her portraits do not aim to deconstruct the psyches of her models, her fragmented landscapes are difficult to identify without captions, and the objects she photographs often seem to have been chosen primarily for their formal qualities. What is at stake in her work, then, is a different kind of unveiling; Sassen seeks to grasp what is lurking, hidden just beneath the surface; and to achieve this, she juxtaposes different realities. She delves into her memory, extracts her dreams, fantasies and fears, and confronts them – like a mirror – with the materiality of the world. Or perhaps, it's not so much a confrontation as a reinvention. With her "cadavres exquis", borrowed from the lexicon of the Surrealism movement that she is particularly fond of, she unsettles the viewer in a way that endures. Sassen's figures and landscapes seem to be driven by a physical force, an extraordinary energy. Her use of colour, movement and framing allow her to infuse her images with power.

For several years now, Viviane Sassen has been revisiting her archives and past works, in the manner of a long-term research project into her own obsessions: death, sexuality, desire, the connection to the other. In particular, she has reworked pre-existing pieces by adding collage, paint or ink to them, practising her art of re-invention as a vital necessity. There is no complacency in her approach, but a constant rethinking of how to create, and to show, differently.

Before concluding this text, I'd like to return briefly to its title, which is taken from the work *The Hearing Trumpet* by the surrealist artist and writer Leonora Carrington. I've chosen to highlight these words because there are similarities between both Sassen and Carrington, in the ways in which they approach their artistic practice using art as a gateway to other worlds, and as a space in which to connect writing and visual creation. Sassen's images have a strong narrative power, giving the uncanny feeling that they should be "read" rather than simply looked at, and the artist regularly collaborates with writers and poets, both for her books and in the production of her photographs.

The book that you are about to discover brings together thirty years of creation, and the perspectives of contributors from the worlds of academia, fashion and art. I hope you will take as much pleasure in immersing yourself in Viviane Sassen's work as I did in working with her on the exhibition at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie as well as this accompanying publication. Where Sassen is concerned, everything may indeed be "fixed", but the light is very much alive.

*Yes, I began to mingle the landscape with my words.  
I thought of tracing a map of the mind and, in pursuit  
of my reflections, proposed a path to the frisson; I shook  
the dusty branches in which faded nymphs were dying,  
I believed my pleasure to be wedded to the light of an idea...*  
—Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 1926

Why begin with words, with language? There is something powerful and strange in the inability of words to cope adequately with images, and vice versa. Photographs sometimes, often, we might argue, seem particularly resistant to words, which can slip off photographic images like water off a duck's back. Photographs don't need words at all in many cases (descriptions being moot/mute), and then, when they do, when a caption or title is everything, they lean too heavily on them, like those strange weight-bearing crutches that Salvador Dalí and Japanese temple gardeners seem to put all over the place.

Viviane Sassen makes images: photography, film, collage, painting, drawing, page layouts, sculptural installations, but she has often worked with writers, poets and thinkers of different kinds to bring about different accommodations between the visual realm and the world of words. For example: I was invited once, at Sassen's suggestion, to participate in a discussion around her series *Umbra* (although shadows are at the heart of much of her practice) in which no one was asked explicitly to discuss the work itself, but instead each to discuss the notion of shadows from their own point of view. An astronomer discussed dark matter in the universe, a psychoanalyst the dark side of the human psyche, and the photo historian shadows in the history of photography. At the time I remember thinking about Surrealism (without knowing of Sassen's interest in it), not because of the marvellous "accidents" which might arise from a conjunction of astronomy, psychoanalysis and art history, but because I was reminded of a charming tendency in surrealist publications on artworks often to miss the point completely, and end up being written about other things. Indeed, in the best surrealist works, text and image coexist mysteriously, each vibrating with the other, generating what Aragon would no doubt call "frisson".

This is definitely true of the celebrated "critical dictionary" which ran throughout the magazine *Documents* from

1929 to 1930, with contributions from many of its contributors, but it is also true of the equally fascinating *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, officially edited by André Breton and Paul Eluard, but also collectively authored, and published in 1938. In neither case do texts and images, or words and meanings, "coincide" in the traditional sense. Instead, as readers we find ourselves playing a series of games that trace meandering paths from signifier to signified. Thinking about these dictionaries that are not dictionaries brings us to Sassen's use of the term "Lexicon" as a series title for a major part of her work. The difference between a dictionary and a lexicon, conventionally, is that one defines words and the other doesn't. But furthermore, where a dictionary might purport to be, or aim to be, exhaustive in a given language, whether French, English or Surrealism, a lexicon is a simple list of words that relate to a particular subject: all the words used in relation to botany, oceanography or Surrealism and so on.

Initially presented in *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* at the Venice Biennale in 2013, *Lexicon*, like Sassen's later project *Umbra*, regroups images from different previously published and exhibited series, including in this case *Flamboya* (2008) and *Parasomnia* (2011). The idea that a photographer might choose to make a lexicon of their own work, or to title an edit of it as such, is a fascinating one: refusing the notion of definition in favour of a "simple list" of things relating to a particular, in this case visual, language.

In one of the more oblique sections of his important surrealist text *Paris Peasant*, Louis Aragon claims that "wherever the marvellous is dispossessed, the abstract moves in." Unlike the idea of "frisson" which seems to have been very personal to Aragon, the "marvellous" was a widely discussed surrealist touchstone for the way in which both artists and writers understood the ability of the everyday (whether objects, scenes or phrases) to reach the heights of poetry. The marvellous, whether achieved through a textual description or visual depiction, was everything that transcended the real to become, literally, sur-real. What then, could it mean for the marvellous to be "dispossessed", as Aragon suggests? And why would this necessarily invite abstraction to "move in"? The dispossession of the marvellous, it could be argued, is essentially a refusal of its definition: making it at once everywhere and nowhere. A lexicon, which also defines nothing beyond its frame, could also be understood as somehow being dispossessed and therefore an open invitation for the abstract to "move in".

Viviane Sassen's work deals in many kinds of abstraction, all of which have much to do with the ways in which photography, since the days of Surrealism, has made the world, or helped us to see the world as strange and marvellous: from the depiction of abstract forms, to the isolation of fragments of bodies, to irrationally assembled objects, to near illegible close-ups, to the play of light and shadow that confuse spaces and the objects within them. But beyond her own unique lexicon of potential, evocative, sometimes even inexplicable forms, Sassen has further developed a pictorial language in which individual elements find their own distinct associations and echoes. Perhaps this is why individual images can slip in and out of different series, refusing to settle as the sole possessions of one idea or another, and instead open themselves up to being re-sequenced



and re-signified. This second (categorical) abstraction is powerful because uprooted from their original contexts individual images (or visual terms within the lexicon) are free both to refuse specific definitions and to re-associate themselves as elements of alternative visual languages. This may be taking the logic of the lexicon too far, but even so, the term does offer a unique way of understanding related groups of unrelated, partially related or only apparently related images.

As an artist, Sassen is rightly celebrated for her practice as a book-maker, specifically a photobook-maker, having worked with numerous independent publishers and having also collaborated with Irma Boom, one of the most renowned graphic designers of her generation. If we think of *Lexicon* as a lexicon, a list of words (or terms) from a specific language, it is tempting to imagine the book itself, or indeed any of Sassen's books, as statements or phrases, however poetic, oblique or abstract they might appear. Let's return briefly to Aragon as he "shook the dusty branches in which faded nymphs were dying", and place around this beautifully evocative visualisation a series of photographic components from Sassen's own lexicon: *Dust*, *Inhale*, *Coffin #2*, *Small Grave* and *Five Candles*, for example. There is an immediate and palpable "frisson" between one and the other. After all, isn't this group of images, in whichever order we place them, also a sentence of a sort, or, at the very least, an arrangement of dispossessed fragments of the marvellous that invite the abstract to move in?

VIVIANE SASSEN: PHOTOGRAPHER,  
SURREALIST, SCULPTOR  
Dawn Ades

During one of our recent conversations, I asked Viviane Sassen whether she self-identified as a surrealist. Her answer surprised me at the time. “Maybe I call myself a surrealist. I also call myself a sculptor.”<sup>1</sup> However, this idea, that she thinks of herself as a sculptor, has proved illuminating, not just in its direct relevance to the physical nature of the huge wall collages, the *Cadavres exquis*, but more broadly in relation to her work as a whole, and her expanded concept of photography. “I look for ... a sort of sculptural form. I try to introduce structure into the chaos – I’m crazy about chaos – of all the things I see.”<sup>2</sup>

Photography has, since its beginnings, persistently and enthusiastically betrayed the cause for which it was apparently discovered. The miraculously accurate representation – whether on glass or sensitised paper – of people, buildings and the natural world, in the mid-nineteenth century, was a shock and a revelation, and the genius of this new medium seemed fixed as that of an accurate recording device. This is the role it has subsequently championed, challenged, celebrated and contradicted, and is not the least of the reasons that it is now undeniably accepted as art, but on its own terms.

The work of Viviane Sassen deepens the mysteries and ambiguities of the photograph, as she continues the long history of overturning the handmaid function once envisaged for it and bridges in totally original ways its conflicted relationship with art.

Photography’s subsidiary function had been forcefully argued for in its early days by the poet Charles Baudelaire, who fiercely attacked the grounds on which the new medium was being acclaimed as art. This was based, he wrote, on the popular misconception that art was “la reproduction exacte de la nature” [the exact reproduction of nature], and had led naturally to the disastrous conclusion that “since photography gives us every guarantee of exactitude that we could desire (they really believe that, the mad fools!), then photography and Art are the same thing.”<sup>3</sup> Attempts to unite art and the new technologies – the conflicting ambitions, as he put it, of “la poésie et le progrès” [poetry and progress] – was producing monsters. To prevent photography from stealing the genius of painting, photography must “return to its true duty, which is to be the servant of the sciences and arts – but the very humble servant, like printing and shorthand, which have neither created

not supplemented literature.”<sup>4</sup> Photography should not encroach on “le domaine de l’impalpable et de l’imaginaire” [the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary]. The true artist should paint what he dreams, not what he sees. The idea that this realm, that of the imagination and the dream, is beyond photography has been fruitfully challenged since at least the early years of the last century, notably in the context of Surrealism.

One of the areas Sassen probes, which links her with Surrealism, is the curious capacity of the photographic image for optical illusions and the creation of metaphor. For example, a photograph in *Umbra* shows a tightly cropped image of a stretched neck, the angle of the chin suddenly turning it into a phallus. Only the dark hair down the side returns it to a (probably female) neck, but the taut and twisting sinews and the shadowed rim continue to haunt with the alternative reading. This photograph has kin – one of Man Ray’s *Anatomies* (ca. 1930) similarly plays on the unexpected anatomical likenesses. Sassen had not consciously referenced Man Ray’s photograph, but willingly acknowledges her long-standing interest in Surrealism and especially in the work of René Magritte and of Man Ray.

It was in connection with Man Ray, in his series of articles in *La Révolution surréaliste*, ‘Le Surréalisme et la peinture’ [Surrealism and Painting], that André Breton first seriously addressed the question of photography – which was far from being accepted as art at the time. His recognition that Man Ray was also a fashion photographer, like Sassen, makes his words especially pertinent. Accompanying the text was an untitled photograph by Man Ray in which mirrors and shadows conspire to obscure the scale and identity of the stacked objects, whose abstract shapes could be architectural or mathematical. No doubt aware of Baudelaire’s diatribe against photography, Breton counters it through the work of Man Ray.

The photographic print, considered in isolation, is certainly permeated with an emotive value that makes it a supremely precious article of exchange (and when will all the books that are worth anything stop being illustrated with drawings and appear only with photographs?); nevertheless, despite the fact that it is endowed with a special power of suggestion, it is not in the final analysis the faithful image that we aim to retain of something that will soon be gone for ever. At a time when painting, far outdistanced by photography in the pure and simple imitation of actual things, was posing to itself the problem of its reason for existence ... it was most necessary for someone to come forward who should be not only an accomplished technician of photography but also an outstanding painter; someone who should, on the one hand, assign to photography the exact limits of the role that it can legitimately claim to play, and on the other hand, guide it towards other ends than those for which it appears to have been created – in particular, the thorough exploration on its own behalf, within the limits of its resources, of that region which painting imagined it was going to be able to keep all to itself.<sup>5</sup>

This region, that Baudelaire had tried passionately to defend against photography, is that of the imagination, invention, the dream, the unknown.

The potential of photography to make visible things invisible to the naked eye: to “either complete or supplement our optical instrument, the eye”,<sup>6</sup> as László Moholy-Nagy wrote in 1925, or as Walter Benjamin put it, to reveal, “with its devices of slow motion and enlargement”,<sup>7</sup> the existence of an “optical unconscious”, tended in the early years of the avant-garde’s embrace of photography to reinforce its differences from the traditional fine art mediums. Sassen is thoroughly at home here, but without losing this fascination with the innately mysterious character of the camera and of photographic processes she is also working in other mediums, developing relationships with art and its histories, and is frank about feeling connected, not just to the Surrealists, but to painters like Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse and “also to more geometric and abstract painters like [Piet] Mondrian and the Russian Suprematists.”<sup>8</sup>

Sassen refuses simply to follow the categories that have been assigned to photography – document, art, experiment, commerce – and tumbles them together in diverse ways. She does, however, regard her fashion photography as distinct from the rest of her work. As she says, if you want to work with photography, fashion is a logical first home. But this has its own demands and conditions. Unusually for her, she allows a certain amount of Photoshop in the context of her fashion photography, manipulation of the image – eliminating the creases on a dress for instance – which she doesn’t otherwise countenance. Nonetheless, there is an undeniable affinity between photography and fashion which artists like Man Ray and Peter Rose Pulham before her also exploited. Breton touched on the mysterious allure of Man Ray’s fashion photographs:

What was merely adornment and what was anything but adornment is abandoned simultaneously to the delectation of the shadows, the justice of the shadows. Only roses are left in the cellars.<sup>9</sup>

For Sassen, it is not the pretty girl, the pretty dress, the necklace in the fashion plate that is interesting, but the nature of seduction, an eroticism that she continues to explore in her work. In fashion, the question of whose gaze is being appealed to is always ambiguous – the female gaze, certainly, as much as the male. The possibilities this question opens up are explored with dextrous ingenuity in her photographs and collages, many of which are of female bodies and body fragments.

Often it is quite hard at first to identify which part of the anatomy is featured in a photograph – a beautiful shape becomes surprisingly abstract but no less erotic. The importance of the “sculptural form” she searches for is evident. Collages in *Modern Alchemy* recombine elements of the nude at differing scales and sometimes in combination with other creatures or objects that enhance the sensuality of the image. Sassen herself speaks of two factors that have influenced her attitude to the body. Firstly, as a woman photographing women, she has herself experienced the other side of the camera, having been for a time a model, so she understands her models’ feelings. As a cis woman, she says, “It’s not about a sexual attraction between us. I can create very erotic photographs, but I try to tap into a different kind of sexuality than you see through the male gaze.”<sup>10</sup> The eroticism, she feels, is as much about her own sexuality; while she was a model she also took

many self-portraits, including nudes, and felt she was regaining power over her own body, enjoying her own femininity.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, she suggests that her fascination with the body dates to her childhood experience of playing with friends in Kenya, while her father worked there as a doctor; they lived next door to a polio clinic and the children were polio victims, but though their limbs were distorted she still felt they were beautiful. Perhaps this experience contributed to her ability to override conventional ideas of beauty.

Sassen’s collages exist independently, usually as unique works, which in their final form can vary dramatically in size. Often they are effectively photomontages: to start with she makes small photographic prints and cuts them up, moving the loose elements around until she finds the image. She then photographs this and may enlarge it. The photographs taken with her Phase One camera are of such high quality that they can be blown up to a huge scale, without losing definition, and indeed revealing details as if in a close-up. This has been crucial to the outsize heads and bodies in the *Cadavres exquis*. Room installations of larger-than-life-size bodies pasted to and tumbling from the walls, the *Cadavres exquis* take their name from the surrealist verbal version of the children’s game Head Body and Legs: “Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau” [the exquisite corpse will drink the new wine]. The game can be either drawn or written – a body or a sentence. The first player draws the head or writes the subject, folds the paper, and the second adds the body or the verb, the third the legs or the object. The result is a surprise to all concerned, a variation on the games of chance or versions of automatism the Surrealists engaged in. Sassen’s *Cadavres exquis* are collages which have in a sense come to life as balletic monsters, constructed from the juxtapositions of anatomical fragments.

Over the last ten years she has been using both paint and collage more extensively and in many different ways. In re-enacting, for instance, the radical abstraction of Kazimir Malevich she transforms it into something uniquely her own. Sometimes a body or object which is to be the subject of a photograph is painted, or she may experiment with coloured inks, which drip and spread to create unexpected, unplanned patterns similar to Surrealism’s automatic techniques.

She is also working with light and colour in installations such as *Totem* at the Hepworth Wakefield, or the presentation for the book launch of *Modern Alchemy* in 2022. In *Totem*, she works on the magical fact that if the three colours red, green and blue are projected onto a square, you get white. However, if the coloured light beam is interrupted by someone walking in front of it, the colour appears. Sassen is, in other words, working with a great variety of mediums as well as photography which overlap and feed into one another.

A very important aspect of her practice are her books. These are not just compilations of images but works of art in their own right. Some are linked to exhibitions, others are free-standing. There is text, but not of an interpretive kind. It could be poems, as in *Umbra* (2015), a philosophical-scientific disquisition as in *Modern Alchemy* (2022), or the more personal notes and an interview in *Hot Mirror* (2018). Each book has a specific theme, but photographs or photograph fragments may

be repeated from earlier projects and newly rearranged. In this way they function as something like words, which hold their meaning, or meanings, in different contexts. This is how Sassen thinks of them.

*Umbra* – Shadows – is dedicated to her father, “whose shadow travelled faster than he did”, who took his own life when she was twenty-two. It is a profound meditation on grief and death, charting a process of recovery. The book alternates visually between an intense black of shadows, and vibrant colours. But it is more complex than that, as often the darkest compositions are “full of light and colour”. They remain, though, symbolic of the inexpressible mystery of Sassen’s photographs, which make one stop and wonder. The powerful effects of the shadows find their equivalents in the poems by Maria Barnas:

Would you mind keeping your shadows  
closer they are bleeding into my life as colour  
flowing into a darkening bruise

For Jung, whom Sassen was reading while working on *Umbra*, the shadow represents “that dark half of the psyche”,<sup>12</sup> an unconscious where, as Sassen puts it, “the things we’re ashamed of ... hidden anxieties and fantasies[,] lie.”<sup>13</sup> She also alludes to the identification of the shadow with the double in a pen-and-ink sketch in *Umbra* of two interlocked figures entitled “the ‘other’”.

In the scenes shot in the desert – which, Sassen says, were the last to be made and the culmination of the project – squares of brilliantly coloured Perspex, red, green, yellow, blue, are positioned against the landscape, slightly blurred against the sharp detail of the sandy wastes, which makes them appear enormous. The link of these uncompromising abstract forms to the great tradition of non-objective art, which began with Malevich’s *Black Square* of 1915, is reinforced by plates in the book that delicately recall the dynamism of Suprematism, or the abstract perspectives of El Lissitzky’s Prouns. Sometimes these images are purely abstract, sometimes the shadow of a human arm falls over them.

The *Black Square* is both an ending of art and its rebirth. It is Sassen’s favourite work of art: “In that small square everything is compressed and reduced to a human scale: creation, life, death. We can project all of our fears and longings onto the abstraction of that work.”<sup>14</sup> The transformations of the black square into colour represent the overcoming of her grief, a kind of release.

The book immediately following *Umbra*, *Of Mud and Lotus*, was an utter contrast. Revelling in messier mediums, including paint and shaving cream, Sassen is celebrating fertility, creativity and the female experience in a thoroughly non-reverential manner, enjoying, for example, the visual analogies picked up by the camera between breasts, fungi and balloons. Among the accumulated objects she photographs are fake nipples, balloons with teats, medical gloves and cows’ udders.

*Modern Alchemy*, published in 2022, is a remarkable collaboration between Sassen and the philosopher and historian of science Emanuele Coccia, in which the text and the images interact but are not illustrations of one another. Each was made independently after many

conversations between them in Paris, during which they fixed on the title suggested by Sassen. The theme of transformation, the alchemical work, unfolds in parallel between the words and the images.

Questions about the status of photography have often turned on the thankless but obsessional task of defining the word “art”, whose origins lie in the Latin term *ars*, meaning technical skill in making. Duchamp neatly turned this against the defenders of its special status: “here it is [his readymade], a thing that I call art. I didn’t even make it myself, as we know art means to make, hand make, to make by hand ... But it is not made by hand, so it is a form of denying the possibility of defining art.”<sup>15</sup> Emanuele Coccia makes a comparable point about the heterogeneity of the things we lump together as “art: ‘Paintings, sculptures, films, design objects, and buildings do not share the same function, the same form, the same material. None of their qualities – whether these are functional, formal or material in nature – would lead us to naturally consider these objects as something homogeneous. And why is their general name derived from the Latin word for ‘technique’?”<sup>16</sup>

Coccia resists the anthropocentrism of so much art and writing. It recalls Hans Arp’s vigorous objections in Dada times to man (the human) making himself the measure of all things.<sup>17</sup> For Coccia, “Everything feels. Dogs, oaks, and mushrooms feel – and so do rocks, clouds, and raindrops. The notion of perceiving and feeling must be freed from its anthropological foundations.” (p. 98)

“Everything feels...” – In the photomontages for *Modern Alchemy* there is a very interesting contrast between the treatment of the female body, which is happily disarticulated, disguised and put together in new formations, and the other creatures which are just as carefully presented but are usually whole: snails, especially, but also spiders, perhaps a gecko, worms, lizards and the praying mantis, famously a favourite of the Surrealists. There is a direct reference to this in one montage: suspended in mid-air by a pair of praying mantises, floating flying carpet-like, is the only male nude in the book, whose buttock is being sucked or devoured by the large centre-stage female head. This is a humorous double take on the notorious habit of the female praying mantis of eating its partner after sex (a habit only in fact noted in the caged praying mantis).

A fine pelican is presented upside down and partially, against tropical vegetation with blood-red flowers. But the focus is on what are usually regarded as the lowest forms of sentient life, often thoughtlessly crushed and considered formless, to which, however, she gives the most beautiful forms. They are sculptural compositions out of the chaos of life. One of the most elegant is the snail on a mysterious green ground which might be pasta or paint strokes. Or she might probe the vulnerability of these slow crawlers, as in the doubled image on page 63, feelers outstretched but surrounded by a sinister red stain, floating against a sky-blue ground. The sense of life in matter, however seemingly debased or bleeding away, is very strong.

Coccia takes his case against the old “hierarchy of being” even further, however: “There is no material or dynamical difference between the living and the nonliving, or between the so-called ‘organic’ chemistry



(to distinguish it from the one addressing other realms) and ‘inorganic’ chemistry ... What’s more, life itself is only one of the specific forms through which matter can exist – life does not represent an ontologically different class of materials or substances.” (p. 106)

As the implications of these ideas are worked through, informed by scientific discoveries, the very idea of collage – or photomontage – takes on a new dimension linking it to alchemy. “Everything is an artifact; everything could be different. There is no teleology when it comes to the living, no purpose and no final objective ... All matter on Earth performs a colossal exercise of bricolage on itself, creating a peculiar form for itself, piecing together and on one another different bits and parts. Maybe we should think of our bodies with alchemy in mind and imagine many other compositions or assemblages.”<sup>18</sup>

So he comes back to the body, in a line that seems directly to respond to Sassen’s photomontages. The disarticulations of the female body are thus performing, metaphorically, the constant transformations of matter in the world.

- 1 Viviane Sassen, in conversation with the author, July 2023.
- 2 Viviane Sassen, interview with Robbert Ammerlaan, in: *Hot Mirror*, Munich et al. 2018, n.p.
- 3 Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1859: Letters to the Editors of the *Revue Française*”, in: *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne, Garden City, NY 1956, p. 230; Fr.: ‘Salon de 1859’, in: *Curiosités esthétiques*, Paris 1962, p. 319: “puisque la photographie nous donne toutes les garanties désirables d’exactitude (ils croient cela, les insensés!), l’art, c’est la photographie.”
- 4 Ibid., p. 232; Fr.: p. 321: “Il faut donc qu’elle rentre dans son véritable devoir, qui est d’être la servante des sciences et des arts, mais la très humble servante, comme l’imprimerie et la sténographie, qui n’ont ni créé ni suppléé la littérature.”
- 5 André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, New York 1972, pp. 32–33; Fr.: ‘Le Surréalisme et la peinture’, in *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 9–10 (1927), p. 42: “L’épreuve photographique prise en elle-même, toute revêtue qu’elle est de cette valeur émotive qui en fait un des plus précieux objets d’échange (et quand donc tous les livres valables cesseront-ils d’être illustrés de dessins pour ne plus paraître qu’avec des photographies?) cette épreuve, bien que douée d’une force de suggestion particulière, n’est pas en dernière analyse l’image fidèle que nous entendons garder de ce que bientôt nous n’aurons plus. Il était nécessaire, alors que la peinture, de loin distancée par la photographie dans l’imitation pure et simple des choses réelles, se posait et résolvait comme on l’a vu le problème de sa raison d’être, qu’un parfait technicien de la photographie, qui fût aussi de la classe des meilleurs peintres, se préoccupât, d’une part d’assigner à la photographie les limites exactes à quoi elle peut prétendre, d’autre part de la faire servir à d’autres fins que celles pour lesquelles elle paraissait avoir été créée, a notamment à poursuivre pour son compte et dans la mesure de ses moyens propres, l’exploration de cette région que la peinture croyait pouvoir se réserver.”
- 6 László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, London 1969, p. 7; Ger.: *Malerei Photographie Film*, Munich 1925.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, ‘A Small History of Photography’, in: *One-Way Street*, London 1997, p. 243; Ger.: ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie’, in: *Die Literarische Welt*, September 18 and 25 and October 2, 1931.
- 8 Sassen, interview with Ammerlaan, in: *Hot Mirror*.
- 9 Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, p. 33 (translation modified); Fr.: ‘Le Surréalisme et la peinture’, p. 42: “Ce qui n’était que parure, ce qui n’était rien moins que parure est abandonné simultanément au goût des ombres, à la justice des ombres. Il n’y a plus que les roses dans les caves.”
- 10 Sassen, interview with Ammerlaan, in: *Hot Mirror*.
- 11 Sassen, in conversation with the author.
- 12 C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, London 1953, p. 29; Ger.: *Psychologie und Alchemie*, Zurich 1944.
- 13 Viviane Sassen, in Robbert Ammerlaan, ‘Loss and Longing’, an interview for *See All This*, no 7 (Autumn 2017). See [seeallthis.com/post-magazine/no-7-herfst-2017/](http://seeallthis.com/post-magazine/no-7-herfst-2017/)
- 14 Sassen, interview with Ammerlaan, in: *Hot Mirror*.
- 15 Marcel Duchamp, in George Heard Hamilton, ‘A Radio Interview’ (conducted with Duchamp in New York, 19 January 1959), in: *Duchamp: Passim: A Marcel Duchamp Anthology*, ed. Anthony Hill, London 1994, p. 76.
- 16 Emanuele Coccia, in Emanuele Coccia and Viviane Sassen, *Modern Alchemy*, Paris 2022, p. 43.
- 17 Hans Arp, *On My Way: Poetry and Essays, 1912–1947*, New York 1948, p. 49.
- 18 Coccia, in *Modern Alchemy*, p. 118.

Early on, Viviane Sassen claimed Surrealism as an important source for her work, both in the sphere of fashion and for her more personal projects. Otherworldly landscapes, silhouettes in climactic poses, sleeping or repeating figures, the disquieting *sur-présence* of everyday objects: all of these motifs that populate the photographer's compositions are mental images born of the chance meeting of seemingly antagonistic realities. To achieve this, Sassen uses a language dear to the Surrealists, drawing on the various possibilities offered by collage, an instrument for the dreamlike reinvention of reality. In this way, Sassen alternates between representations that draw exclusively on a reality that is more or less staged, and more experimental aesthetic images in which painting, radical chiaroscuro and chromatic screens act as perceptive openings for the imagination.

In addition to this proclivity for the surreal, Sassen shares with Surrealism, and more specifically with the members of the historic group, a poetic and overtly political attention to the "Elsewhere" and the "Other". For the Surrealists, the intellectual and cultural decentring offered by non-Western civilisations provided a vital stimulus for the renewal of ideas and poetic expression. The Pacific and Africa, among others, were privileged terrains for this cultural and aesthetic reinvention, one which exhibited a certain reductionist tendency that must be acknowledged. Rejecting both the phoney exoticism of colonial exhibitions and the ethnography that flourished in inter-war Europe, the Surrealists found in the otherness embodied in the fantasised figures of the "Other" – otherwise known as the "Native" or the "Primitive" – a source of both regeneration and disenchantment, as the poet-turned-ethnologist Michel Leiris recounted in 1934 in *L'Afrique Fantôme*, a diary of his personal journey – both of the mind and body – across the African continent.<sup>1</sup>

Some decades later, in some way Sassen had learned the lesson. It was not as an ethnologist, nor as a tourist, nor even as a journalist that she made Africa a decisive stage in her artistic development in the early 2000s. In fact, a significant part of the artist's family mythology plays out in the many visits she made to the continent during this period. Between the ages of two and six, Sassen lived in a village in Kenya with her father who was a doctor fighting the ravages of polio in a bush clinic. Sassen shares some of her memories from this time in *Hot Mirror*, recalling episodes from a daily life

marked by the discovery, through the eyes of a child, of the differences in conditions between those of her white family and those of the locals. Her vivid descriptions capture the emotions and sensations aroused by both the natural environment and the ill and deformed bodies: "Late one afternoon, with a low orange sun at our backs, I was sitting with a friend on top of the climbing frame at the 'Crippled Home' next to our house. At the Crippled Home, there lived a group of children of around my age whose bodies had grown a little bit crooked. The sun went down at exactly five to six, and ten minutes later it was dark – that's how swiftly night fell."<sup>2</sup>

The return to the Netherlands brought this African interlude to an abrupt close, giving the photographer both a latent sense of uprootedness and an ambivalent feeling of belonging to a cultural and social world that was both close and distant, as she regularly expressed it: "While feeling to be a part of this world, I have also kept on being aware of the fact that I would never really be a part of it. Very soon, I have come to understand that I would always remain a stranger. In this way I try in my work to figure out this ambiguity. You feel close but at the same time distant."<sup>3</sup>

In the early 2000s, Sassen returned to the continent on a more regular basis, firstly to South Africa, where she came face to face with a reality that was very different from her personal memories. The photographs she took of young people in the townships of Cape Town illustrate her discovery of an Africa that she had never seen before, an urban Africa shaped by the historical and socio-political post-apartheid situation. While the images she produced at the time reveal her taste for colour, her painterly use of flash, and her precision in anchoring bodies in the frame, Sassen's gaze takes on a surprisingly documentary quality, even a subtly critical one in the series *Die Son Sien Alles* [The Sun Sees Everything] (2002–2004), published in book form ten years after it was made.<sup>4</sup> In this series, Sassen captures the interiors located in the townships of Cape Town: private homes, boutiques, hairdressing salons and bars. The precariousness of these spaces contrasts with the advertising that covers the walls, making all the more cruel the confrontation with this glossy world of consumerism, which is as inaccessible as it is falsely democratic, particularly from the point of view of race.

Nonetheless, Sassen abandons this documentary approach in favour of a more personal and visually experimental approach to the Africa of her childhood. In this way, she attempts to reactivate sensations and memories through genuine visions outside of time: "It turned out to be a crucial journey for me. Back in my village, the memories of the past were revived. Vivid dreams. Images in my head. Ideas for photos. It was a eureka moment for me, as if my childhood in the past and my adulthood as a photographer suddenly came together."<sup>5</sup>

The photographs in *Flamboyant* (2004–2008), *Parasomnia* (2007–2011) and *Umbra* (2014) combine staged or more spontaneous shots taken on the streets of cities in Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. Apart from a few objects or details in the landscape, it remains difficult to identify these spaces, which blend together and merge in the various series, with no concern for documentary accuracy. In these pictures, free of any

temporal or geographical points of reference, the bodies of the models and the objects are placed in a certain chromatic and formal tension in the service of tableaux with the cryptic meaning that has become the artist's trademark.

In a short space of time, Viviane Sassen's photographs made a major contribution to the visual understanding of the African continent and its inhabitants in the early 2000s, breaking free from the humanitarian aesthetic, documentary language and exotic fascination of nature and tourism magazines that dominated the Western visual universe at the time. Not ethnographic surveys, nor journalistic reports, nor even idyllic postcards: behind its unquestionable photogenic seduction, Sassen's "African" body of work could be the object of intrigue or even unease in the context of a challenging critical reflection on the representation of Black men and women in the visual arts.

This critical perspective can be compared with recent efforts to problematise the poetic and intellectual essentialisation of Black and non-Western cultures by the Surrealists in their day. In Sassen's work, beyond aestheticisation, it is more particularly the commodification of the bodies and their relative anonymity, accentuated by the play of shadows obscuring the faces, that are the focus of the most critical reactions. It should be stressed, however, that this extreme aesthetic formalisation – which is even more evident in her recent work – applies to all bodies, whatever their colour, as well as to all the elements – objects, landscapes, colours, shapes – that she models, sculpts and deconstructs in her dreamlike visions, drawing above all on painting and the fine arts tradition in general.

However, Sassen accepts the feeling of ambivalence that images linked to the mirages of her African experience can provoke for some people. She also admits, with great openness, the personal, intellectual and creative path that it has led her on, and which still sustains her work and her artistic career today.

- 1 Michel Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, trans. Brent Hayes Edwards, Calcutta 2017.
- 2 Viviane Sassen, *Hot Mirror*, Munich et al. 2018, n.p.
- 3 Viviane Sassen, quoted in Lucy Morris, 'Marte Mei van Haaster Selects Viviane Sassen', *Dazed*, 22 August 2012, [www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/14269/1/marte-mei-van-haaster-selects-viviane-sassen](http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/14269/1/marte-mei-van-haaster-selects-viviane-sassen).
- 4 Viviane Sassen, *Die Son Sien Alles*, Stockholm 2012.
- 5 Harriet Fitch Little, 'Photographer Viviane Sassen on art, fashion and intuition', *Financial Times*, 29 June 2018, [www.ft.com/content/1719719a-7997-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d](http://www.ft.com/content/1719719a-7997-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d).

*The idea of the body that emerges from Viviane's photos seems to take up an ancient philosophical motif, that of the human as the place of facelessness and identity. This is an ancient idea first formulated by Plato: that the human being is not a form, but the absence of forms, the absence of face, because it coincides with the capacity and power to assume them all. Viviane's idea is more playful and radical: all living things have no forms, and life is but this game of exchange and découpage, of bricolage of faces and silhouettes.*

—Emanuele Coccia on Viviane Sassen (2023)

The symbiotic relationship between fine art photography and the world of fashion is one that stretches back a century, all the way back to image-makers from Man Ray to Frank Horvat, Guy Bourdin or Deborah Turbeville. Commercial objectives aside, the latter has helped propel the former through intriguing waves of creative evolution. That force has undoubtedly evolved visual culture as a whole. Though this phenomenon has often remained concentrated around the major fashion capitals of the world, pockets of brilliance have flourished on the periphery. Amongst them, Viviane Sassen is one talent who rose to prominence in her native Amsterdam with a singular vision that has contributed significantly to the impact of a radical Dutch school of photographers that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. From an early age, she produced images that revisited Surrealism with a frank, unpolished perspective on our contemporary reality. Alongside the duos of Anuschka Blommers & Nils Schumm and Maurice Scheltens & Liesbeth Abbenes, Sassen grew up immersed in fashion as a natural complement to art and photography. Together, their often gritty, experimental works challenged the silky-smooth aesthetics of digital fashion and art photography that came to define the turn of the twenty-first century.

Since her teenage years, fashion modelling and a natural compulsion for coaxing shapes from her body allowed Sassen to unlock the graphic possibilities of the female form, both in front of the mirror at home and under the male gaze of fashion photographers of the time. This intimate knowledge of her own contours has nourished her work for decades, starting from the self-conscious sense of erasure seen in her early self-portraits. "I think of myself more as a sculptor than a photographer sometimes," says Sassen, who often depicts the human body as a purely abstract form.

"As a young girl I would make strange shapes with my body in front of the mirror and look with one eye or another to re-align the lines of my body. I enjoy looking for the right angles to make the body and the clothing appear more graphic."

A sense of boundless curiosity and irreverence has allowed Sassen to subvert the traditions of commercial image-making, challenging the established rules of what is beautiful and blurring the lines between what is art and what is fashion imagery. "Fashion is interesting because it can absorb everything and anything," continues Sassen, who, unlike many of her contemporaries, is quick to defend the benefits and liberties that fashion magazines and brands have allowed her over the years. "I have experienced so much freedom with editorial work as it's a laboratory for ideas that would end up in my art, and vice versa." By divorcing the human silhouette from classical notions of beauty, Sassen's images often trick the eye without the need for distorted lenses or heavy post-production. Rather, it is her keen sense of the third dimension and the illusory powers of light and shadow that provoke the most intriguing photographs in her canon. "I work very fast," she explains, debunking any notions of painstaking set design and in situ trickery. "I don't work with tripods, or difficult setups. I don't like to use more than one light, or I just use ambient light. I'm very impatient. I ask someone to hold something for a minute or two to try something then I'm done."

Reduced to hips and hands, ribs, limbs and all matter of curling, abstracted possibilities coaxed from our human morphology, Sassen's subjects – clothed or otherwise – share their frame with the world around us. Sometimes deserts, from Marrakech to Addis Ababa. Dutch tulip fields. Salt mines and swimming pools. At times layers of paint, ink and paper collage extend the fantasy impregnated in her mise-en-scène, yet elsewhere it is simply her unique approach to photographing high-fashion garments that transforms them entirely. For the most part, she is indifferent to the names of most fashion designers, and seasons hold little consequence. She recalls few of such details in her photographs – save those attached to a brand's campaign, which consequently are some of the few instances one may see a logo or brand name in her work. When "fashion" enters into her images, it does not take centre stage, but simply extends a gesture of colour and texture that's already there. By seeing through the banal utility of a striped skirt, a sharp coat or a billowing sleeve, Sassen is able to strip clothes of their purpose, exploiting their extravagant volumes, patterns and surfaces to become graphic colour fields and exotic flowers.

Despite retaining a comfortable distance from the machinations of the fashion world and its exhaustive cycle – keeping a studio in Amsterdam, raising a family, and pursuing a healthy travel schedule – Sassen has maintained a fruitful working relationship with avant-garde fashion magazines, cutting-edge stylists and upscale luxury brands for over two decades. Each has informed and evolved Sassen's fashion portfolio in different ways: the first as a platform for experimentation, the second as irreplaceable co-conspirators in the creation of radicalised imagery, and the third as both financial support and validation of a lifetime of prolific creation. Unlike the solitary praxis of fine art



photography, in which the photographer's autonomy is entirely assumed, the creation of editorial and campaign images in fashion is a much more collaborative exercise. For Sassen, this has included a number of recurring partnerships over the years, with stylists such as the New York-based French talent Roxane Danset (herself a frequent model for Sassen) and the British stylists Vanessa Reid and Katie Shillingford, with whom she has often collaborated on ambitious fashion shoots in studios and on location for independent magazines including *Pop*, *AnOther Magazine*, *Dazed & Confused* and *Purple*. Not only providing a precise curation of garments and accessories that help bring Sassen's fashion photos to fruition, these women are active participants in the image-making process – often leading with creative pitches, storyboards and themes prior to shooting, and driving the instinctual evolution of images on the fly. With Danset, their partnership has achieved an unprecedented intimacy, as the duo have explored nudity and portraiture in myriad sittings over the years, resulting in a pair of published monographs and numerous editorial projects that convey the full spectrum of Sassen's photographic and artistic vision around the sacred feminine.

Similarly, in-house creative directors and third-party art directors are instrumental actors in the commissioning and execution of the fashion images that art photographers shoot for fashion brands. Thanks in part to their forethought, Sassen's career has been punctuated by projects that demonstrate the willingness of luxury brands to expand their horizons towards more progressive visuals. In 2002, a series for the Italian house Miu Miu designed by Miuccia Prada depicts a pair of models in choreographed poses that constantly questioned her subject, each girl somehow erased by the other, alternating from protagonist to prop. In one image, the pair are seated side by side on a chest of drawers, one seated backwards turning to reveal her face, the other stretched out of sight with her legs peeking out from a patterned skirt. The effect is perturbing, as if a single body – one festooned with girlish prints and flounced fabrics – is stretched and flipped like an exquisite corpse across the other. This early campaign is a potent example of Sassen's recurrent disregard for identity in her work – prioritising the image's integrity over her subject's recognisability. "The concept of hiding the face keeps reappearing in my work," says Sassen, who rarely chooses models or subjects for their celebrity or fame. "It's not about not liking who I take photos of, but I continue to be drawn to the images that don't show faces, as often it feels more intriguing. It's about erasing the form. I started with erasing myself in difficult times in my life. And I realise I still do the same thing." Nearly twenty years later, Sassen was entrusted with the documentation of the Belgian designer Dries Van Noten's Spring/Summer 2021 collection, for a lookbook commissioned in lieu of a fashion show during the Covid-19 pandemic. Printed with the early light works of the New Zealand artist Len Lye, the collection's polychrome depth allowed Sassen to explore a diverse array of brightly printed garments and coloured scrims, lens flares and projections. Shot both on location and in the studio, during the day and at night, they made for an authentically hybrid series – one that blurred the lines between editorial and commercial fashion images with Sassen's signature clearly visible throughout.

Stripped of artifice, some of Sassen's more recent commissions for the houses of Dior and Louis Vuitton have exhibited a more classical approach to her aesthetic. Destined for giant billboards, website banners and glossy magazine spreads, they rely on her masterful use of natural light and dramatic sense of perspective to highlight fashion collections on models standing tall against such arresting backdrops as the temples of Udaipur or the beaches of Tangier. These images, whilst retaining the principles of vivid colour and eye-catching dynamism so inherent to Sassen's work, adhere to a sense of polished formality. They are a departure from the primal, diaristic expressions that emerge from Sassen's more independent fashion projects, where the primary concern of her collaborators is not the glorification of product, but the chance to unlock and consequently publish her work at its most pure and unadulterated. It is through these projects that Sassen truly bends fashion to her will, with an almost alchemical sense of sublimation between fabric, paint, paper, light and skin.























