

SOHRAB HURA, from the *Land of a Thousand Struggles* series, 2005–06, matte photograph paper with text, dimensions variable. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Experimenter, Kolkata.

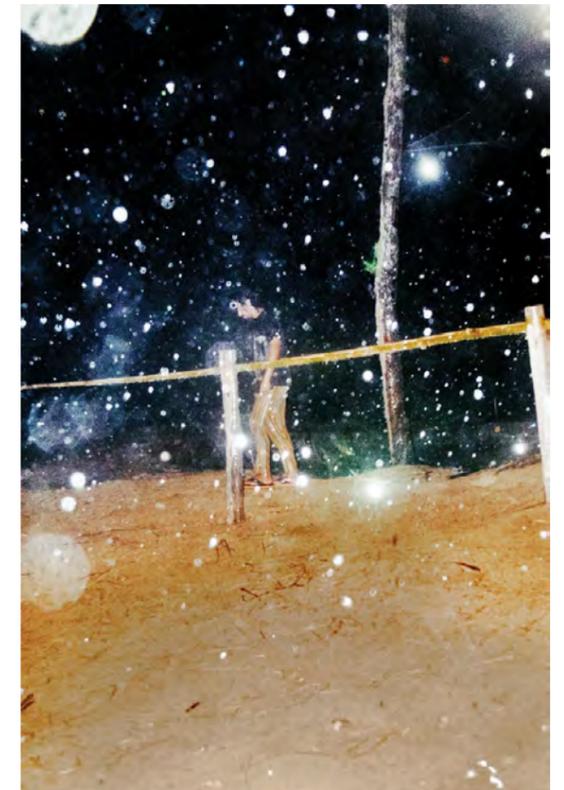
The recent rise of majoritarian politics in countries across South and Southeast Asia—from the Hindu supremacism of Narendra Modi’s government in India to the state persecution of minorities in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar—has pushed many minority communities to the margins of society while also throttling outlets of free expression. In recent years, to the concern of international human-rights organizations, governments have shut down internet access and blocked social-media accounts in the face of social unrest—as India did during the annexation of Kashmir in August 2019 and recently during farmers’ protests in Delhi. This era of persecution and repression has in turn stimulated a strain of photo activism, which prioritizes political concerns and uses the medium as an outlet for pushing under-represented narratives to the fore.

One of India’s most acclaimed photographers, Sohrab Hura began his photographic career when, at the age of 23, he joined a 52-day activist-organized tour through central and northern India to galvanize support for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Known as the Right to Food movement, the campaign brought together more than 180 organizations to safeguard rural livelihoods. Hura chronicled this historic moment in his series of black-and-white photographs, *Land of a Thousand Struggles* (2005–06). Today a Magnum photographer who continues to explore new ways of presenting his imagery, whether in installations or in videos, he has steadily gained recognition for his self-published photobooks including *The Coast* (2019), which won The Paris Photo – Aperture Photobook of the Year Award in 2019 for its nighttime scenes of beachgoers paired with unsettling, and vicious street encounters in the dark. Interwoven with a narrative short story, *The Coast* is related to *The Lost Head & The Bird* (2019), a high-speed film which

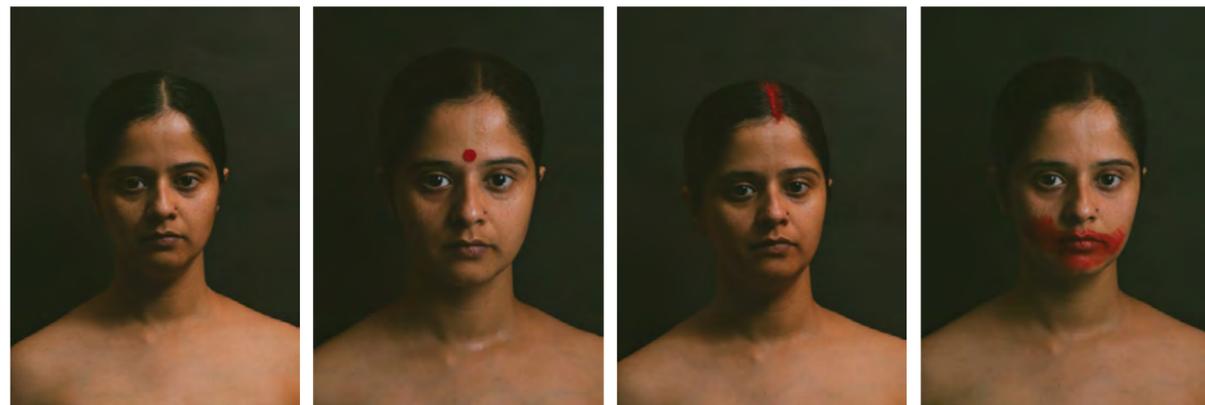
captures the specter of rising violence fueled by caste, sexual, religious, and political divisions. Hura was recently featured in “Companion Pieces: New Photography 2020” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he showed two bodies of work: the *Snow* (2015–) series, which explores Kashmir’s stunning white-capped mountains—a tourism lure—and the biting reality of life for those caught up in the ever-shifting politics between India and Pakistan; and *The Song of Sparrows in a Hundred Days of Summer* (2013–), in which he captures the life of a village in Barwani, Madhya Pradesh, one of the hottest, driest areas of the country.

Building on his explorations of social dissonance, Hura made his curatorial debut in 2021 at Dubai’s Ishara Art Foundation with “Growing Like A Tree,” in which he supplied a lively glimpse of the layered photographic worlds simultaneously anchored in, and transcending, South and Southeast Asia. The show, of 14 artists and collectives, took its title from Hura’s conceptualization of his practice as a tree with outreaching branches that intermingle with other practices. The exhibited artworks were linked by thin pencil lines to suggest an interconnected mass of artists who weave in and out of each other’s practices. The walls bore intimate anecdotes from the artists related to their pieces. Such flourishes, along with a range of personal snapshots of Hura’s and others tacked to the walls with masking tape, endowed the exhibition with a striking dynamism. The viewer felt caught in a conversation that was noisy and enthusiastic, tender and caring. The generosity of spirit and collaboration among these artists was palpable, as was the obsession within their practices.

There was urgency and a soft aggression that coursed through many of the works in “Growing Like A Tree.” Bunu Dhungana’s *Confrontations* (2017) series, for instance, is a punchy rebuff to



SOHRAB HURA, from *The Coast* series, 2013–19, archival pigment print, 61 × 40.6 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Experimenter, Kolkata.



BUNU DHUNGANA, *Confrontations* series, 2017, digital photography, dimensions variable. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



Installation view of BUNU DHUNGANA's *Confrontations* series, 2017, archival pigment print, dimensions variable, at Photo Kathmandu 2018. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

Nepal's patriarchal traditions. Over eight self-portraits from the shoulders up, the artist portrays herself morphing into a bride—with bindis covering her entire face, or wearing a red lace veil (*ghumti*) tied tightly around her neck—and spiraling into a taut, screaming mess. Originally displayed in a busy temple complex in Kathmandu, the images put people face to face with their prejudices around expectations of femininity.

At a time when politics across the region is oscillating between the extremes, and taboo subjects are proliferating, photography is emerging as the “democratic language,” Hura explained. While relations between nation-states may be weighed down by grievances and antagonism, the common experience of heightened surveillance and censorship has bred a sense of solidarity among many citizens that can cut across communities and borders. Artists are picking up on that and are part of a collective reaction.

Hura encountered this tension between citizen and state “in a concrete way” at Nepal's first Photo Kathmandu festival in 2015. The festival launched in the aftermath of a catastrophic earthquake—the country's most devastating natural disaster in living memory—and against the backdrop of protests against Nepal's new constitution. Among the remnants of the historic city Patan, where the festival was situated, Hura remembered seeing an unorthodox charity drive: embassies donating diesel and petrol rather than funds to support exhibitions and workshops. The reason for this novel form of “fundraising” had to do with the Indian government's fuel embargo, which was allegedly Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's retaliation for Nepal's constitutional transformation from a Hindu kingdom into a secular state, his way

of turning up the pressure at time when the country was already on its knees. Demonstrating Nepal's resilience, the festival jump-started Patan's recovery; an online print sale raised USD 14,000 for part of its rebuilding.

This independent resolve has helped Photo Kathmandu flourish. Under the direction of the festival's organizing body, photo.circle, each of the three subsequent editions stirred up a frenetic buzz in the city, uniting established and aspiring photographers, picture editors, industry insiders, and the local community. The air filled with talks of process and portfolios, with review sessions, workshops, and a specialized incubator program. This ebullient atmosphere has contributed to the city becoming the linchpin of the region's burgeoning photographic activism. In an essay that accompanied his exhibition, Hura pinpoints Kathmandu as “a nucleus within [a] larger ecosystem” of transboundary photo-activism.

Nepal's relative accessibility to artists from the region has played a large part in making the festival a central meeting point. Most visitors do not need visas. For Hura, an Indian passport enables him to cross the border without the stress of interminable questions and checks. Nepal's visa regime is “upside down,” Hura said with laughter, because “it's the only place where [Indians] can pass through but . . . Europeans and Americans need to queue on arrival.”

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, photo.circle's founder, notes how images presented by artists and historical matter have pulled together communities. “Our work and interests are very much a response to ongoing sociopolitical pushes and pulls here at home

in Nepal,” she explained. She too noted that the rampant growth of authoritarianism, casteism, and patriarchy across South Asia is provoking counter-expressions among artists across the region. And photography has been grasped upon as a medium that is strengthening the sense of self often threatened, insidiously, by these forces. Kakshapati has seen the shift toward a long-term, in-depth approach that uses image-making to identify, define, and preserve the narratives that are being quashed and erased.

The historic under-representation of Nepali communities led to the establishment by photo.circle of the Nepal Picture Library (NPL) in 2010. One of its objectives is to unearth the rich and complex histories of the country and put them on display. The archive is actively attempting to centralize hauls of historic photographic documentation and make it accessible online. As part of its pioneering initiative, the Feminist Memory Project, a team of researchers were recently sent to the country's remote regions, to document new material that brings to the fore examples of women's political activity and ambition.

Among the NPL's growing collections one documents the life of Shanta Manavi. Her black-and-white analogue photos and oral recollections give new insight into the rise of women in Nepal's Communist movement, which was forced underground by the long years of absolute monarchy between 1960 and 1990. The women's wing, All Nepal Women's Association, operated at great risk from private homes, discussing policies for the group and teaching classes about communist theory. The images show how the clandestine nature of the movement advanced radical



Photo from the Shanta Manavi Collection (1976). Copyright Shanta Manavi. Courtesy Nepal Picture Library, Kathmandu.



Photo from the Shanta Manavi Collection (1991). Copyright Shanta Manavi. Courtesy Nepal Picture Library, Kathmandu.



Photo of the "Basics on Photography" workshop hosted by THE CONFLUENCE COLLECTIVE at Namchi, Sikkim, 2020. Courtesy The Confluence Collective.

opportunities for political participation. Its contemporary relevance is unmissable: the process of amassing the NPL archive brings together budding photographers and researchers and inspires a renewed sense of political drive.

The Confluence Collective (TCC), who have been assisted by NPL, believe visual storytelling can help shape more responsive and responsible forms of policymaking. Based across the foothills of the Himalayas, from India's northeastern state of Sikkim to the adjacent Darjeeling Hills, the group intends to expand and increase political agency through their acts of visual and oral archiving. The area they cover has known its share of regime change and associated violence. Formerly an independent kingdom and then a British princely state, Sikkim was annexed by India during Indira Gandhi's administration in 1975. And although now part of India, it is often cast aside in state politics. "We feel like we are doubly marginalized," Mridu Rai, one of the founders of TCC, explained. "First of all we're the Global South and then, in the Indian context, the northeast is again ethnically and geographically marginalized."

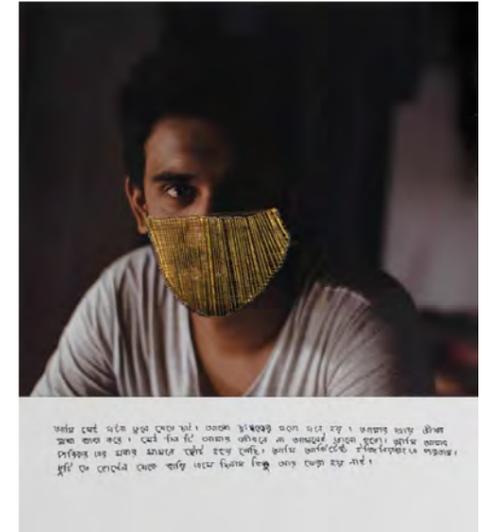
TCC has found the visual medium to be an accessible catalyst for discussing sociopolitical issues in an area peripheral to what Rai calls India's "mainland history." They have acquired a space in Kalimpong that they will move into once conditions allow. From here, with the aid of a prestigious grant they recently won, they intend to initiate an expansive project to work with domestic and construction workers and mobilize local NGOs, Sikkim's social justice and welfare government department, and public health officials with the objective of advocating and informing empathetic policymaking. Yet the collective's activity is perilous. Its novel approach in the region, coupled with its emphasis on being a platform for diverse narratives, invites the threat of scrutiny from a jittery state. "Whatever we do will eventually become a political concern," Dipti Tamang, a member of the collective, admitted. "State surveillance is always there in the back of [our] mind."



YU YU MYINT THAN, *Sorry, Not Sorry*, 2019, book comprising art, sakura, and blue jean paper, 13 × 18.5 × 1 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Singapore International Photography Festival 2020.

This anxiety, shared by other photographic practitioners, is giving rise to practices where discretion is prioritized over directness. The pressure to cloak images and deploy metaphor is felt nowhere more acutely right now than in Myanmar—a country that has known a crucial yet often tragic relationship with photojournalism. In the wake of the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the form flourished as a convenient means of documenting and disseminating the effects of civil resistance launched against the military junta. Yu Yu Myint Than, a Myanmar-based photographer and co-founder of the all-female Thuma Collective, remembered the shifts in photographic strategy necessitated by changes in political regime. And now, as the military battles to impose itself after staging a dawn coup on February 1, the situation has again escalated. "We have expressed ourselves and were telling stories before [the elected government of] Aung San Suu Kyi, and we knew how to deal with the secret police. This is unique," Yu Yu stated. Carrying a camera is to make oneself a conspicuous target. Yu Yu recalled a photojournalist whose hand was shot at and others who, fearful of informers, have moved into safe houses. Yu Yu has quietly captured the propaganda posters strewn over the tarmacked streets. Faces of the military, stained with betel nut juice, lie crumpled into the ground, evoking the violence flaring up on the streets.

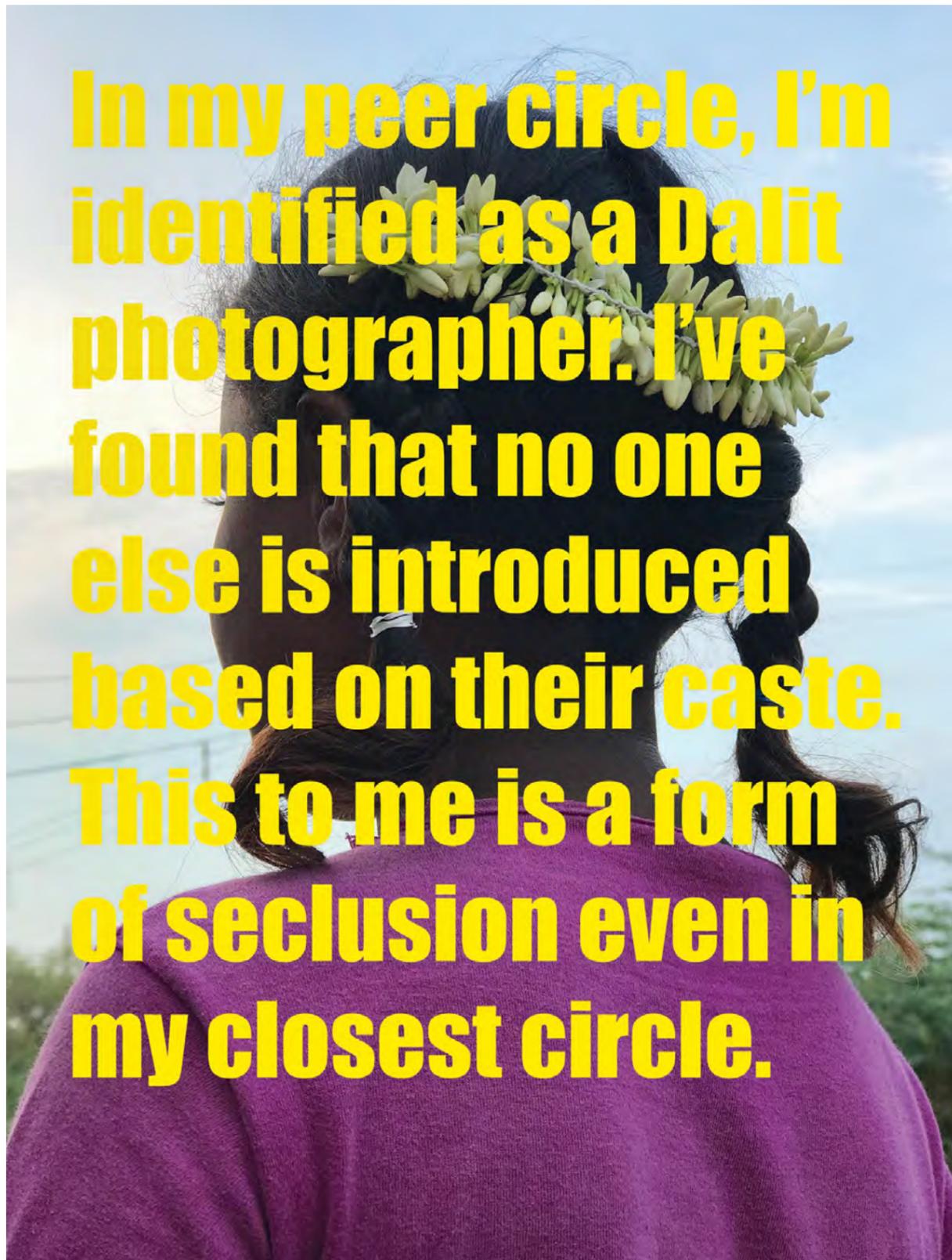
The belief in photography as a counterpoint to oppression spurs the six members of the Thuma Collective. Their investment in developing the medium and promoting female perspectives has been fortified by the unceasing military savagery around them. Adapting to dips in internet connections and mobile blackouts, they continue their female mentoring system and seek solidarity with others in the region, such as the Kaali Collective, who operate in Bangladesh. Together, they self-published *Bridging the Naf* (2019), a photobook that speaks of the common sensitivities around political subjectivity in both countries.



ASHFIKA RAHMAN, from the *Files of the Disappeared* series, 2018- , stitching on photograph printed on paper, 29.7 × 25.4 cm. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



ASHFIKA RAHMAN, from the *Files of the Disappeared* series, 2018- , digital photograph, dimensions variable. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



In my peer circle, I'm identified as a Dalit photographer. I've found that no one else is introduced based on their caste. This to me is a form of seclusion even in my closest circle.

JAISINGH NAGESWARAN, *I FEEL LIKE A FISH*, 2020, archival pigment print, 46 × 61 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai.

This year, Kaali Collective were part of the Chobi Mela festival's online programming. Held every two years in Dhaka since 2000, the festival's origins are steeped in a vision of social justice. Its founder, the photographer and activist Shahidul Alam, has experienced personally the kinds of human-rights violations the festival's participants portray and critique. In 2018 he was jailed and later denied bail for supposedly contravening a censorship law, widely deemed to be unjust, for his comments in an interview with Al Jazeera about student protests. That specific episode, and the progressive deterioration of human rights in Bangladesh, has informed the festival's outlook. Working under various state sanctions and censorship laws, it has sought to become a safety net—"a space where we can ensure independence and act out a performative democracy," as Tanzin Wahab, the festival director, explained. "People are scared to talk freely and critically," and for its duration, the festival attempts to surmount these limitations and let go of self-censorship.

The festival has put "critical citizenship" at the center of its programming, with an emphasis on citizen-led action against divisive politics. This year, the festival worked with judicial advisors and policymakers and it remains constantly at risk from state retribution. Participating photographers such as Ashfika Rahman, Kauser Haider, and Razib Datta create images that relate to the disappearances, abductions, and humiliations that minorities are made to endure. They have to work with extreme caution to keep people's identities hidden. Wahab is proud of the role that the festival plays in giving space for "new approaches." External pressure requires participants to add "extra tools" and be creative. "You never stop strategizing," he said.

Despite the yearning for political change that courses through their work, photographic communities are not immune to the prejudices embedded in social hierarchies. It is a world in which systemic inequalities can thwart talent and limit inclusion. From Tamil Nadu in southern India, Jaisingh Nageswaran articulates this in his series *I FEEL LIKE A FISH* (2020). In bold yellow Impact font overlaid on photographs of his family members, he spells out his social vulnerability in one image: "In my peer circle, I'm identified as a Dalit photographer. I've found that no one else is introduced based on their caste. This to me is a form of seclusion even in my closest circle." Other works speak about his family's struggles, social isolation, and memories of violence. His experiences mark a continuation of a history of oppression, and the absence of Dalit photography speaks to the privileges implicit in India's photographic tradition of education, wealth, and birth that enable smoother access to the medium for some over many others. When opportunities to exhibit and to sell work are limited, photography tends to favor those who are not dependent on it for economic survival.

Yet, for the committed photographers there is a tendency to find ways to prevail against these obstacles, for as Hura explained, what is at stake here for many artists is "far more urgent than photography." In this way, the medium is best understood as a means to locate a response to the region's ongoing political churning—not an end itself. Image-making undoubtedly grants independence and a creative route to circumventing restrictions on critical and cultural activities, while also chronicling events of the day, articulating personal reflections, and spreading awareness about acute issues. This is an expanding endeavor, and given the strength of the works Hura included in "Growing Like a Tree" and the visibility it has provided, the medium will certainly be increasingly deployed, and works will be exhibited elsewhere on their own terms. What we are seeing are just "the first ripples," as Dayanita Singh, a doyenne of image-making whose works are a citation in Hura's show, suggested. "The work has already happened with this exhibition and it's going to keep spreading."