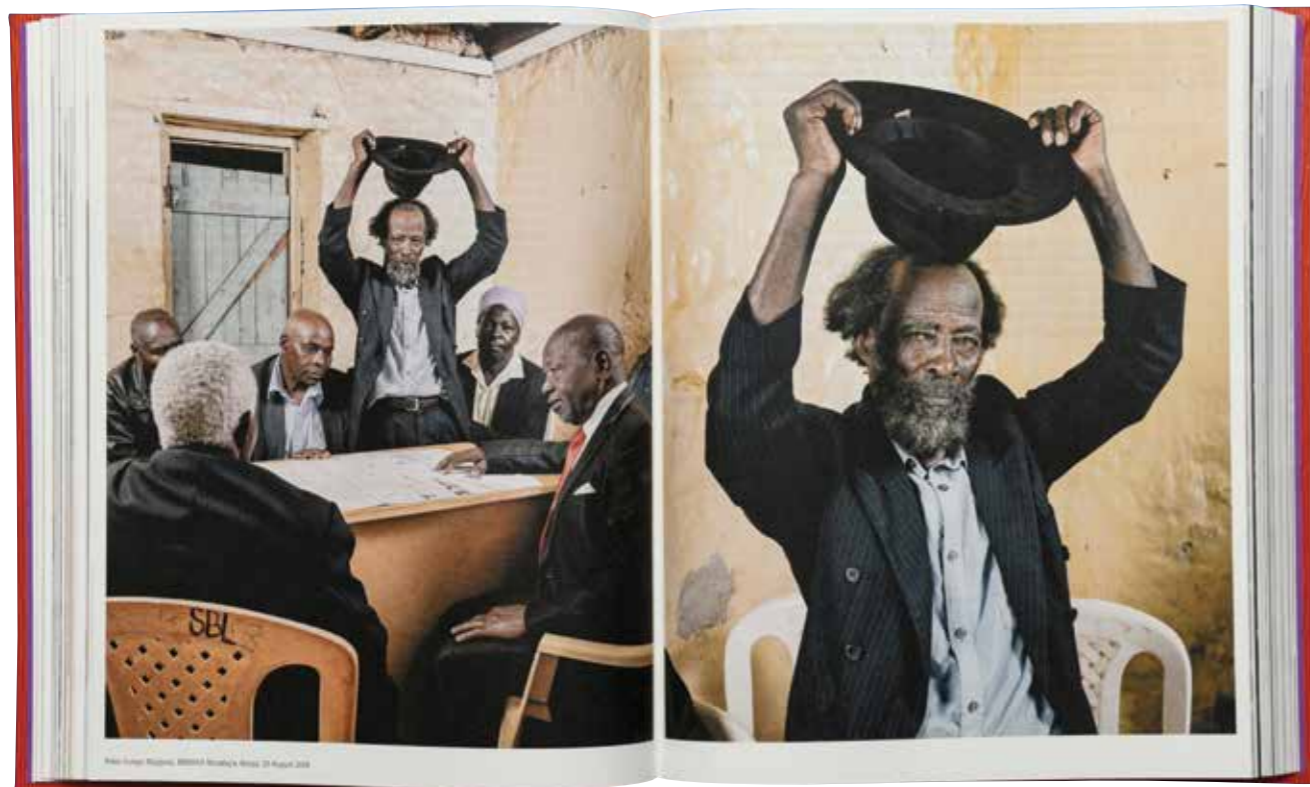
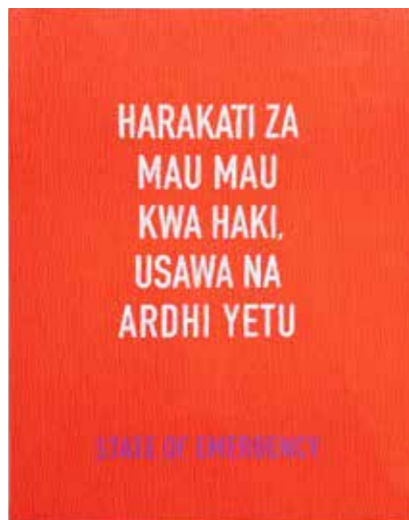


# REDEFINING PHOTOGRAPHY

Ahead of Max Pinckers's solo exhibition at the Dilip Piramal Art Gallery, his first in India, photographer **Akshay Mahajan** turns the pages of the early and current works of the Brussels-based artist to underscore how the medium can be re-imagined and repurposed in more ways than one.



The exhibition *Open Books* at the NCPA's Dilip Piramal Art Gallery in Mumbai situates Belgian photographer Max Pinckers's evolving body of work in a city that shaped one of his earliest endeavours. Central to this display is *The Fourth Wall* (2012), conceived in Mumbai's distinctive cultural ecology, where the cinematic seamlessly seeps into the everyday, and reality itself can feel like a perpetual film set. Originally printed on cheap newsprint and interspersed with tabloid snippets and Bollywood ephemera, *The Fourth Wall* was never fixed or final: it eschewed the premise of a singular authoritative truth. Instead, it posited a fluid, speculative terrain, embracing instability to challenge the idea of photography as a "taxidermical" medium that mounts its subjects like static specimens.



By acknowledging the world's perpetual state of flux—especially in a city as restlessly performative as Mumbai—the photobook urges us to look more critically at how images can simultaneously document and fabricate experience.

In stark contrast, *State of Emergency* (2024), Pinckers's latest work, propels the viewer from the theatrics of Mumbai to the post-colonial landscapes of Kenya, engaging histories long relegated to the margins. Collaborating with descendants of the Mau Mau uprising, Pinckers orchestrates re-stagings of events that official

archives have either denied or left unrecorded. This practice resonates with an emerging field often termed "speculative documentary", in which images are not simply reliable witnesses to what happened,



The Horse to be Sacrificed must be a Stallion, from the 2014 series *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty*

impulse and embraces a future where archives might grow new forests rather than entomb old stories.

Pinckers, who often describes himself as a "photographer's photographer", has long engaged with the form's self-reflexive potential. His early works revelled in the complexity of representation: scenes commenting on scenes, images unmasking their own constructed-ness, narratives folding in on themselves. If that earlier reflexivity flirted with infinite regress—photographs about photography itself—*State of Emergency* redirects this questioning outward. Instead of merely highlighting the instability of images, he now attends to how photographs intersect with living histories, unresolved trauma and environmental stewardship. The reflexive turn here is not an internal loop of aesthetic inquiry, but an ethical posture, forcing us to consider

**Each project by Max Pinckers refracts the core idea that photography is never neutral. Instead, it is a field of encounter, a place where interpretation and memory collide, where power and representation must be actively negotiated.**

but engines that reanimate submerged narratives. Rather than frame subjects as inert objects trapped within the photographic plane, these re-enactments acknowledge that histories are inherently unstable: they shift, mutate and reappear in new forms. Here, the camera's lens becomes a tool of restoration, a means of insisting on pasts that remain contested, unresolved and very much alive.

*State of Emergency* also differs from *The Fourth Wall* in how it circulates and engages communities on the ground. While the earlier book emphasised impermanence and mediated spectacle, this recent publication deploys its materiality in the service of historical redress. Approximately 25 per cent of its print run has been donated to Kenyan veterans' groups, transforming the photobook from an aesthetic object into a functional instrument. No longer confined to galleries or collectors' shelves, it operates as a resource for those striving to assert their own versions of history. With the book in their hands, descendants of the Mau Mau movement are leveraging its imagery to reclaim neglected narratives and to galvanise environmental initiatives, including reforestation efforts in Kenya's central highlands. The publication thus becomes a nexus of social, ecological and historiographical action—an unruly medium that defies the taxidermical

how the medium can operate as a conduit of agency, dialogue and repair.

An anecdote involving *State of Emergency* and the British monarchy epitomises these tensions. Pinckers repeatedly attempted to send copies of the book to King Charles III—an emblem of Britain's colonial legacy. While the late Queen Elizabeth II once received a photobook without incident, the new monarch's household repeatedly returned Pinckers's parcels unopened. In response, the photographer began to affix more stamps to subsequent mailings. These unopened packages, accumulating value even as they were rebuffed, form a quiet performance of historical reckoning. The returned parcel becomes a mute exchange, a stubborn insistence that the past—however inconvenient—will not vanish simply because it is refused. This small drama reframes the photobook as more than a messenger: it becomes an active participant, provoking confrontations between



Top: *Zindagi* from the 2014 series *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty*

Jay J. Armes from the 2018 series *Margins of Excess*

foreground it, harnessing reenactment, participation and narrative instability to unlock new ways of understanding what came before. They expand the documentary's purview from the descriptive to the generative, encouraging viewers to question who holds the reins of history and how its fragments might be rearranged for more inclusive futures.

Pinckers's other photobooks extend this ethos. *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty* (2014) braids personal stories with cinematic illusions and reportage; *Red Ink* (2018) interrogates media sensationalism by assembling propaganda-like visuals that trouble the distinction between fact and spectacle. *The Future Without You* (2023), co-created with Thomas Sauvin, is

a 1990s stock photo archive that forges speculative genealogies that oscillate between truth and allegory. *Margins of Excess* (2018) charts the strange destinies of individuals caught in the tangles of America's post-truth era. Each project refracts the core idea that photography is never neutral. Instead, it is a field of encounter, a place where interpretation and memory collide, where power and representation must be actively negotiated.

*Open Books* thus captures Pinckers at a point of conceptual expansion. Moving from the playful uncertainty of *The Fourth Wall* to the urgent historiographic interventions of *State of Emergency*, he renders visible the trajectory of a practice that refuses to let photography petrify into artefact. On the contrary, these photobooks invite a more complex engagement—a recognition that images can be activated, repurposed and reimagined. From the filmic streets of Mumbai to the contested landscapes of Kenya, the photobook emerges not as a closed object but as an open site, one where speculative documentary can reconvene with history's ghosts, reforest its narratives, and open space for alternative futures to take root. ■

memory and power, testimony and avoidance.

Such gestures chime with the principles of speculative documentary, which rejects static claims of objectivity and the fetishisation of "fact". Practitioners understand archives as incomplete and images as partial truths—raw materials to be fashioned and re-fashioned in pursuit of pluralist histories. Rather than conceal their own constructed-ness, speculative documentaries

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*Max Pinckers's solo exhibition Open Books will be on view from 9th to 19th January at the Dilip Piramal Art Gallery.*