

Artist: Paul Almásy
 Date: circa 1960
 Medium: Vintage ferrotyped gelatin silver print
 Classifications: Photograph
 Credit Line: Gift of Dr. James and Debra Pearl
 Object: 2021.0345
 Copyright: © Artist/ Artist's estate

Artist: Joel Sternfeld
 Date: 1979
 Medium: Chromogenic print
 Classification: Photograph
 Credit Line: Museum purchase
 Object: 1990.165.17
 Copyright: © Artist/ Artist's estate

Artist: Nick Brandt
 Date: 2015
 Medium: Pigment print
 Classifications: Photograph
 Credit Line: Gift of Dr. James and Debra Pearl
 Object: 2022.0094
 Copyright: © Nick Brandt

Artist: Ken Heyman
 Culture: American
 Date: 1981
 Medium: Vintage gelatin silver print
 Classifications: Photograph
 Credit Line: Gift of Peter Chatzky
 Object: 2020.0061
 Copyright: ©Ken Heyman



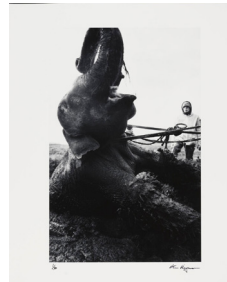
[An elephant crosses the road, Africa](#), Paul Almasy [Object 2021.0345]



[Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland Washington](#), Joel Sternfeld [Object 1990.165.17]



[Wasteland With Elephant](#), Nick Brandt [Object 2022.0094]



[Endangered Species - Bogs of Scotland](#), Ken Heyman [Object 2020.0061]

Teaching guide by Jeffrey Adams, PhD student in English

Paul Almásy's *An elephant crosses the road, Africa* (circa 1960), Joel Sternfeld's *Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland Washington* (1979), Ken Heyman's *Endangered Species—Bogs of Scotland* (1981), and Nick Brandt's *Wasteland with Elephant* (2015) are all photographs of elephants, but their social, historical, and geographical backdrops enable diverse avenues for considering these images. In Almásy's photo, the pictured elephant is upright and comfortably crossing a road, seemingly at ease with its surroundings. In contrast, in Sternfeld's picture, the elephant is laying inert on the road, unconscious from being tranquilized after its escape from captivity. Heyman's image, which is also of an elephant in captivity, shows the animal struggling in a bog with ropes around its neck; it is clearly trapped in the marsh, and the surrounding humans are trying to hoist it out. Brandt's image incorporates a blown-up, life-sized image of an elephant he previously photographed, so as to physically place it within a landscape it can no longer inhabit. The elephant idly walking across the road in Almásy's photograph is a part of the African landscape surrounding it, but in Sternfeld and Heyman's photos, the pictured elephants are aberrations from what one would expect to find on a two-lane road flanked by pine trees in Washington State or living within a Scottish bog. Brandt's work is unusual when placed in dialogue with these three other images because it makes visible the absence of elephants in a space where

Teaching Guide
 Photographs of Elephants

Context

The status of elephants in the Western cultural imagination and as a biological population dramatically shifted in the fifty-five-year timespan during which these four photographs were taken. During this period, there was an uptick in cultural interest in the conservation of animals both in captivity and out in the wild, and elephants were an early focus of some of these conservation efforts. To name a few historic touchstones that occurred between the taking of Almásy, Sternfeld, and Heyman's photos: 1961: the World Wildlife Fund was founded; 1973: both the Endangered Species Act and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora were passed; 1975: Peter Singer published his now-classic book *Animal Liberation*. Singer's book opened new avenues of philosophical and legal dialogue about animal rights and the ethical claims that animals have on humans. As awareness increased around the need for animal protection during the 60s and 70s, zoos and their treatment of elephants became heightened sites of cultural vexation.

Elephants in the wild were (and still are) under threat from humans, so zoos and wildlife sanctuaries responded by holding them for preservation and research purposes. Arguably, this work can help the individual elephants held in captivity and their species writ large. Between 1918 and 1962, no elephants born in captivity in the United States survived infancy, largely due to the fact that the births occurred within circuses that lacked facilities, resources, and knowledge to care for newborn elephants adequately. In 1962, at the Oregon Zoo (then called the Portland Zoological Gardens), an elephant named Packy became the first Asian elephant to be born in a zoo within the United States. Packy lived well into adulthood, not passing away until 2017. The birth of Packy triggered a move towards zoos breeding elephants to populate their exhibits rather than importing them from the wild. In fact, since the 1980s, most elephants in zoos in the United States have been bred and born in captivity, and many of these zoos have been actively trying to maintain their elephant populations through breeding efforts. On October 24, 2022, the first surviving set of captive twin elephants in the

United States were born at the Rosamond Gifford Zoo in Syracuse, New York. This event strengthened the already existing elephant population within this Syracuse zoo and also helped grow the total population of elephants in captivity in the United States.

Nevertheless, debates continue about whether elephants should be held in captivity at all, and these debates include institutions within the zoological community. Major zoos such as the Toronto Zoo and the San Francisco Zoo recently phased out their elephant populations because of continued concerns around the ethics of elephant captivity. These ethical debates have also transformed into legal battles. In 2022, a case before the New York State Supreme court argued that a captive elephant named Happy was being illegally confined in the Bronx Zoo. The court ruled that Happy was not legally a person and thus could not be held captive illegally, but two of the seven judges voted in favor of Happy's freedom. Notably, Happy was the first elephant ever to be recorded as passing a mirror self-recognition test, a test that is often used to establish a being's sentience. Opponents of holding animals in captivity stress that even when zoos and sanctuaries protect and research elephants with the best intentions, they cannot erase the harm that occurs when elephants are removed from their environments and then forced to live in spaces unlike their natural habitats. Others regard the use of elephants for human entertainment as inherently problematic, regardless of the elephants' origins. Still others point out that all the elephants currently living in captivity cannot be released into the wild without embarking on significant rewilding efforts. As Brandt's photo makes clear, many environments which were once natural homes for elephants are no longer habitable for them. The photograph underscores the ways that people have made and continue to make it difficult for elephants to survive in the wild.

Elephants are native to many parts of Africa and Asia, so the African elephant in Almásy's photograph is in its "home" habitat, but elephants are, of course, not indigenous historically to Scotland or

Context cont.

to the state of Washington, the locations of Heyman's and Sternfeld's respective photographs. The photos thus prompt the questions: "How did these two elephants get to these places? What are they doing there?" In the case of Brandt's photograph, elephants are indigenous historically to the African location depicted, but the elephant in the photograph survives in the setting only as a depiction itself, thereby prompting a slightly different set of questions: "What has happened to this place? Why are there no elephants there?"

The elephant in Sternfeld's picture was named Thai, and he was held with eight other elephants on a farm called Elephant Mountain, run by the animal breeder Morgan Berry. (In the early 1960s, the Oregon Zoo had contracted with Berry for the elephants Belle and Thorglaw, Packy's parents.) No one ever figured out how Thai was able to escape, but after Thai was found, Berry was subsequently discovered dead on his farm. His body had been trampled by another elephant named Tonga who was chained up on his property. Authorities never determined whether Berry died because of an existing heart condition or from Tonga crushing him to death: his body was too mangled for an accurate autopsy to be performed. Some speculation emerged that Berry could have had a heart attack which then made Tonga so upset that he crushed Berry's body. Many of Berry's friends and family members believed it to be unlikely that Tonga trampled Berry unprovoked. The discovery of Thai's escape and Berry's corpse came about because Berry's son called the police to do a wellness check on his father because of his heart problems. Neither Thai nor Tonga was euthanized following Berry's death.

Sternfeld's photo, taken in the aftermath of this event, depicts a tranquilized Thai lying on the road in Woodland, Washington. The unconscious elephant obstructs the road and is surrounded by uniformed police officers: it lays there out of place and incongruent with the pictured

ecosystem. According to one news article, to get Thai home, "a smaller, docile female elephant [was] brought out to entice him" (*Ellensburg Daily Record*, June 29, 1979). Several news sources speculated that Thai and Tonga may have acted out because these events transpired during elephant mating season, a period when elephants (especially bulls) exhibit increased aggression and erratic behavior. Due to such speculations, one sensational news article about the incident was even titled "Elephant Crazy By 'Sexual Problems'" (*Times-Union*, June 28, 1979). The macabre details of Berry's death and the absurdity of an escaped elephant in Washington state permit the emergence of wild speculations regarding the what, why, and how of the situation that Sternfeld's image captures.

Almásy's photograph also captures an elephant on a roadway, but the roadway's African setting makes the elephant seem more congruous with the pictured landscape. There is no information about where in Africa this photo was taken (though the vegetation indicates the biome is temperate). That said, much of Almásy's work after 1952 was done on the behest of the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). That his work was funded by these organizations underscores the implicit ideological work of *An elephant crosses the road, Africa*. Almásy took pictures all over the world, and throughout his career he primarily photographed areas in the Global South with the goal of depicting structural problems in these regions. He did this in part to map changes that were brought on by globalization, changes that his broader photographic corpus crafts into a narrative of gradual social progress. In doing this, Almásy's work often ignores the problems caused by continuous colonial expansion and instead paints the West as a civilizing force that brings new medical, technological, and economic resources to sometimes exoticized countries in the Global South.

Context cont.

Ken Heyman also worked as a global photographer. His photograph of an elephant struggling to get out of the Scottish bog was taken on the set of the film *Quest for Fire* (1981), but the elephant's placement in the bog was not a planned part of the film's shooting. Trained elephant actors played mammoths in *Quest for Fire*, and the film's crew members dressed the animals up in fur and glued fake tusks to their existing tusks so that they would resemble their extinct ancestors. Their outfits led one contemporary reviewer to say that the film's "mastodons look like what they are – elephants with brown shag rugs glued to their bodies" (*The Boston Globe*, February 27, 1983). The absence of a costume on the elephant that Heyman photographed, however, indicates that the photo was not taken during filming. In an interview about the making of *Quest for Fire*, the film's director, Jean-Jacques Annaud, explained that the accident occurred when one of the trained elephants rushed towards another elephant on the set and stepped into a bog, not realizing that the swampy land would absorb his body. Heyman's photo thus highlights the animal's out-of-placeness. The elephant did not possess a natural attunement to a Scottish ecosystem and did not know—really, could not have known—that a marsh should be avoided by a creature his size and weight. The pictured elephant was eventually rescued from the bog physically unharmed.

Brandt's *Wasteland with Elephant* was taken almost thirty-five years after Heyman's photo. The life-sized panel of the elephant is from an earlier photograph titled *Elephant Sails* (2011), and this panel stands in stark contrast to the people sifting through the waste strewn all over the ground. This ecosystem could once sustain elephant life but now lies barren and largely uninhabitable. In his book *Inherit the Dust* (2016), for which this photograph was taken, Brandt writes: "We are living through the antithesis of genesis right now. All those billions of years to reach a place of such wondrous diversity, and then in just a few shockingly short years, an infinitesimal pinprick of time, to annihilate that" (7). Brandt sees animal life and habitats

dwindling on a global scale, and this photograph, like many of his other works, attempts to craft a record of this ongoing loss. Continuing to use Biblical language, Brandt goes as far as to say that "there is a continent-wide apocalypse of animals" in Africa (119). In contrast to both Sternfeld's and Heyman's photographs, the elephant found in Brandt's image was not actively suffering while Brandt was snapping his picture. Instead, the suffering of elephants as a species is made implicit through the animal's absence. Brandt captures ecological conditions representative of ways that entire populations of elephants have come under threat.

Critically, human suffering is just as important an ecological concern as animal suffering for Brandt, and he recognizes the tension that exists between humans as both perpetrators and casualties within the environments' degradation. He writes: "I hope that viewers of these photos realize that it is not just the animals that are victim [sic] of this destruction of the natural world. It's also the impoverished humans that are victims" (104). This is a critical point for Brandt to make given that he is documenting Africa's ecological decline, which is largely a legacy of Western colonial expansion and capitalist exploitation. The people scavenging in "Wasteland with Elephant" are not responsible for the ecological and economic conditions that are making their survival progressively more difficult. Worsening ecological and climatic conditions have put their lives just as much under threat as those of elephants and other animal species.

Artist Backgrounds

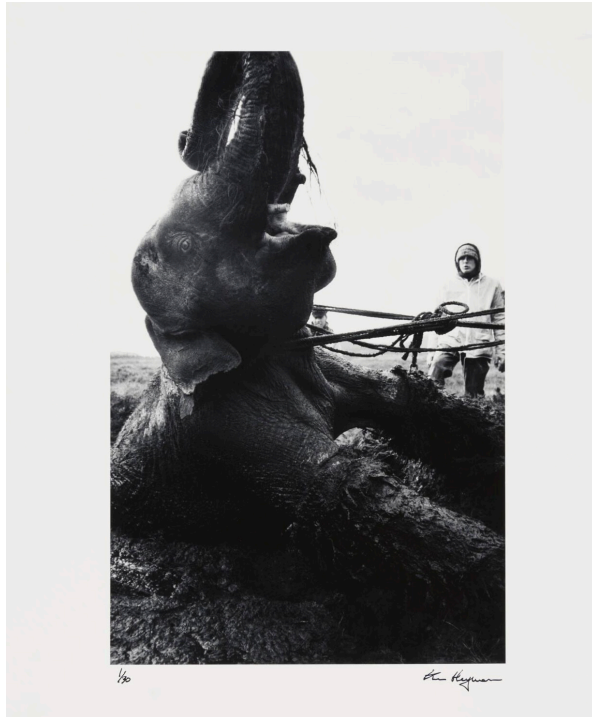


Joel Sternfeld (1944-) is an American photographer who has taught at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, NY, since 1985. His work primarily chronicles a variety of people throughout the United States and attempts to trace America's ever-shifting human and ecological landscapes. Sternfeld is known for his unique approach to color photography and his use of ironic juxtapositions. He has published many books of his photography, including *American Prospects* (1987), *On this Site: Landscapes in Memoriam* (1996), *Strangers Passing* (2001), and *Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America* (2006).



Paul Almásy (1906-2003) was a Hungarian-born Swiss photojournalist who lived much of his life in France. He sought to photograph diverse parts of the globe and the range of people living across economic, national, and cultural lines. Much of his work was funded by United Nations' institutions, and he held professorships at both Sorbonne Université and Le Centre de formation et de perfectionnement des journalistes. Almásy's understanding of himself as primarily a photojournalist led him to take photos with the goal of informing his viewers about people and places that they might not otherwise see, interact with, or even know about.

Artist Backgrounds cont.



Ken Heyman (1930-2019) was an American photographer who considered his approach to photography to be anthropological. Much of his work was done in collaboration with the notable anthropologist Margaret Mead, a former professor of his at Columbia University (then Columbia College). Heyman regularly took photos for *Life* magazine, among other publications. He was the sole author or a collaborator on many books, including: *This America* (1966), with Lyndon B. Johnson; *Family* (1968) and *World Enough: Rethinking the Future* (1975), with Mead; *The Private World of Leonard Bernstein* (1968) with John Gruen; *Hipshot: One-Handed, Auto-Focus Photographs by a Master Photographer* (1988); and several children's books.



Nick Brandt (1964-) is an English photographer who works in Africa, where he documents the continent's increasingly worsening ecological and climatic conditions. Before starting his photography career, Brandt directed music videos for well known artists such as Michael Jackson, Moby, Jewel, and XTC. He also founded the non-profit organization Big Life Foundation that hires rangers to stop poachers and preserve Africa's ecosystems and animal life. Brandt has made many photography books, including *On this Earth* (2005), *A Shadow Falls* (2009), *Across the Ravaged Land* (2013), *Inherit the Dust* (2016), *This Empty World* (2019), and *The Day May Break* (2021).

Discussion Questions

- How does knowing where each of these photographs was taken inform your reading of them? Why does it matter where geographically each of these elephants are within each of these photos?
- How do certain places by virtue of people's assumptions about them produce analytic cues that representations of these places can either complement or transgress? How can surprise or bewilderment inform our analysis of artworks (specifically these photos)? Where do our assumptions about certain places come from? What is "unnatural" in each of these photographs?
- Do these images complicate a term like "unnatural"? Why or why not? What is "wild" in each of these photographs? Do these images complicate terms like "wild," "tame," or "wilderness"?
- How can what we know about the intentions of Almásy and Sternfeld inform our analysis of their images? Almásy was taking photographs for United Nations agencies, whereas Sternfeld was trying to capture alterations in the American landscape for what would become his book *American Prospects* (1987). How does knowing the broader contexts for these photographers' works affect how we understand the contents of each image?
- Sternfeld's work specifically tries to represent the United States. On the other hand, Almásy's photographs seek to be, in his words, an "archive of the world." Heyman's work follows a similar cosmopolitan impulse as Almásy's, and Brandt's photographs are only taken in Africa, a country that he is not originally from. What similarities and tensions do you see existing in these photographers' respective (though topically connected) projects? How do these similarities and tensions play out in these three images? Can these photographs help us to think about the inherent friction between nation and world as organizing categories? What happens when a photographer documents an area where they are from versus when a photographer chooses to capture images of places they are not originally from?
- Despite representing the same subject matter (an elephant on a road), Almásy's and Sternfeld's photographs are very different formally. How does the difference in each photographer's perspective (Almásy taking a photo from an airplane and Sternfeld being on the same road as the elephant) impact what we see in these images? How does the size and location of the elephant in the frame of each photograph impact the photograph's significance?
- Almásy's and Brandt's photographs are taken fifty-five years apart. How does each image's presentation of their respective elephants and landscapes make visible shifting cultural attitudes towards Africa as a geographical site? What are the similarities and differences between each of the photographs' political messages? How would the physical changes of the African continent change what both Almásy and Brandt were able to capture in their photographs?

Discussion Questions cont.

- Both Sternfeld and Heyman are photographing captive elephants in environments in which they cannot survive without human interference. In each photo, the pictured elephant is physically responding to the distress of living outside of an ecosystem that is habitable for it. To what extent are these photographs commenting on the ethics of elephant captivity (or of animal captivity in general)? What's your evidence for this? How do these pictures of elephants compare to the kinds of depictions of elephants and elephant captivity that you may have seen before in zoo advertisements?
- How do the differences in color affect what details come to the foreground in our viewing of these images? What are the formal affordances of black and white photography versus color photography, and how do these affordances affect how you interpret the significance of these images?
- The term “capture” is commonly used in photography as a synonym for the record the image keeps of its subject. How does a commonplace and seemingly innocuous word such as “capture” change when what is being photographed are animals such as elephants who have a long history of being hunted, confined, and traded? Does photography as an art form follow similar logics of containment (if perhaps only visual and not physical)?
- Almásy's, Sternfeld's, Heyman's, and Brandt's photographs represent a lone elephant, a detail that sticks out because elephants often travel in herds. What type of commentary does the absence of other elephants in these photos afford? Why during a period where elephants are becoming increasingly endangered might Almásy, Sternfeld, Heyman, and Brandt represent solitary elephants? How does Brandt's photo's absence of a physically present elephant make elephant species precarity even more legible (especially given its much later creation date)?

Selected Recent Texts

Further Scholarly Reading on Western Cultural Representations and Uses of Elephants:

- Mosier, Jennifer L. “The Big Attraction: The Circus Elephant and American Culture.” *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999, pp. 7-18.
- Wood, Amy Louise. “‘Killing the Elephant’: Murderous Beasts and the Thrill of Retribution, 1885–1930.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2012, pp. 405–444.
- Rothfels, Nigel. *Elephant Trails: A History of Animals and Cultures*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.

Suggested Literary, Cultural, and Filmic Pairings:

- Annaud, Jean-Jacques. *Quest for Fire*. 1981. Film.
- Armstrong, Samuel, Normal Ferguson, Wilfred Jackson. *Dumbo*. 1941. Film.
- Franklin, Howard. *Larger than Life*. 1996. Film.
- Jodorowsky, Alejandro. *Tusk*. 1980. Film.
- McGrath, Jeff and Cathy Malkaisan. *The Wild Thornberrys Movie*. 2002. Film.
- Murakami, Haruki. “The Elephant Vanishes.” 1985. Short Story.
- Orwell, George. “Shooting an Elephant.” 1936. Literary Nonfiction.
- Passarello, Elena. “Jumbo II.” *In Animals Strike Curious Poses*. Sarabande Books, 2017. Literary Nonfiction.

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