

drawings or portraits of victims of a mis-carriage of justice, period documents or a performative transposition of a health scandal: the manufacture of evidence through images, that of the *fait divers*, is one of the key subjects of artistic practices. [...] Forensic reconstruction is also an object of special attention from artists who question the visual culture of the *fait divers*, as relayed by the illustrated press, the cinema and the electronic media. It is a ‘theatre of justice’, to use the words of François Niney in *L'Épreuve du réel à l'écran. Essai sur le principe de réalité documentaire* (Bruxelles, De Boeck, 2002).

If there is one operation that is common to these artistic practices, it might be this: in the face of the procedures laid down by the law for establishing the truth, they re-establish the public’s function as arbiter in relation to the image of the *fait divers*.

Exhibit 1 The recipes of Henri-Désiré Landru

Landru, who was sentenced to death in 1921 for the murder of eleven women, meticulously kept an account book in which he recorded the sums and objects brought in by his criminal activities: his “takings.”

— With artworks by
Corinne May Botz, Benoît Broisat, Sylvain Fraysse, Natascha Niederstrass, Christian Patterson (Investigation) Eduardo Arroyo, André Raffray, Bob Watts (Clue)
Lewis Baltz, Halida Boughriet, Julien Tiberi, Nils Vandevenne (Judiciary) Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Delphine Balley, Pierre Huyghe (Reconstruction) Julien Audebert, Yan Morvan, Cécilia Vicuña (Witnesses)

Disaster scenario Equation with two unknowns

[...] The public’s amazement and even disbelief at the scale of certain disasters places a considerable burden on news images: that of corroborating the facts. When tragedy strikes, there is an unquenchable thirst for images. Images are given a variety of surprisingly contradictory tasks: on the one hand, to attest to the facts, provide evidence and dispel doubts; on the other, to fuel beliefs, generate suspicion and satisfy voyeuristic or morbid impulses. This functional ambivalence is at the heart of artistic practices that, for example, question the verisimilitude of the situations depicted: road or air accidents, murder scenes, deaths captured live, or unusual events. The ways in which *faits divers* are artified evoke police investigations, remote surveillance, television culture and literature. It’s up to viewers to decipher the fictional aspect of these events and decide whether or not they are true, to carry out their own investigation, even when apprehension of the work is deliberately hindered. [...] Although suicides are occasionally staged, preceded by notes and instructions of various kinds,

they are so shocking that, at least in the short term, they negate any explanatory discourse. In contemporary art, they take the metaphorical route of the death of the artist, of statistical rigour, or, paradoxically, of humour. All are singular ways of expressing the irreparable.

Exhibit 2 Dress worn by Barbara Stanwyck on the set of the film *Titanic* (Jean Negulesco, 1953)

This moisture-stained film costume is a tangible link with the reconstruction of one of history’s greatest maritime dramas: the sinking of the *Titanic*. Often regarded as a “catastrophic *fait divers*,” the sinking of the *Titanic* continues to mark people’s memories and inspire the cinema.

— With artworks by
Maurice Blin, Véronique Boudier, Nicolas Descottes, Caroline MacDonald (Burned) Carole Benzaken, Ode Bertrand, Mohamed Bourouissa, Brognon Rollin, Éric Dubuc, Michel François (Crash) Ben, Bureau of Inverse Technology, John Giorno, Michel Journiac, Philippe Ramette, Alain Séchas (Suicide) Nina Laisné, Lidwine Prolonge, Jason et Carlos Sanchez (Usurpation) Absalon, Ana Maria Gomes, Jacques Monory (Plausible)

Doing Violence Equation with three unknowns

Some *faits divers* are repulsive because of their violence. The brutality they express also complicates how they are translated into images. What to show so as to do more than just stun? For reasons to do with the rules of law, journalistic ethics and changing sensibilities, the illustrated press no longer reproduces the violated bodies of the victims of sordid crimes. [...]

The violence that characterises heinous *faits divers* is not always portrayed in such a head-on way in contemporary artistic practices, even when these deals with sordid crimes are widely reported by the illustrated press, the electronic media, television series or the cinema. [...] The iconic visual documents that these tragedies have generated compel artistic responses. The critical reuse of these famous images, the poetic deciphering of visual details that have passed under the radar of the journalistic and legal gaze, or the insertion of these documents into an alternative narrative of the events are processes favoured by artists. [...] The writings of the *fait divers* – handwritten notes farewell messages or administrative documents can also be found on picture walls. Words imbue the images with an otherwise diffuse, uncertain meaning, or on the contrary, create confusion in an apparently literal representation. Words are just as essential to the visual imagination of crime.

Exhibit 3 Cast of the hand of Jean-Baptiste Troppmann, produced by Maison Tramond

The wax hand of Jean-Baptiste Troppmann was made in 1870, from a cast applied directly to the criminal shortly before his execution. He was sentenced to death for the murder of Madame Kinck and her five children in the “Pantin Massacre.”

— With artworks by
Christian Boltanski, Nicolas Daubanes, Marko Mäetamm, Éric Pougeau (Murder) Nicolas Cilins, Camille Gharbi, David Levinthal, Teresa Margolles (Femicide?) Xavier Boussiron, Joël Brisse, La Brodeuse masquée (Kidnapping) Agnès Geoffray, Daniel Pommereulle, Éric Pougeau, Kiran Subbaiah (Notes) Pascal Bernier, Claire Dantzer (Outrage)

Open Your Eyes — Equation with four unknowns

Faits divers invite us to ‘open our eyes’, literally, by dissecting the organ itself. This is because, at the moment of death, the eyes remain imprinted with the last image they perceive. This unusual hypothesis pervaded the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century a time when the ‘eye of the dead’ [...] was the stuff of fantasies. [...] Just like eyewitnesses, objects hold the story of events for those who understand their language.

[...] The public wants to see. That’s why the headlines of sensationalist magazines and newspapers feature images, why illustrations sometimes occupy the entire cover or form the visual prologues of successful television programmes. Even today, *faits divers* are scrutinised and amplified by the print and electronic media, television and social networks, elevating some of them to the status of classic tragedies. [...]

Exhibit 4 Doctor Petiot’s peephole

In 1944, Doctor Petiot promised his victims, who were threatened by the Nazi occupiers, that he would help them escape to Argentina, and then murdered them by asphyxiation in a room adjoining his office. Through the peephole, the doctor could watch his victims die.

— With artworks by
Samuel Bollendorff, Stephen Chalmers (Places) Sabine Monirys, André Raffray, Bruno Serralongue (Media) Pascale Mijares, Éric Pougeau (Punctum) Julien Creuzet, Didier Paquignon, Nancy Spero, Yann Toma (Watts) Mac Adams, Camille Gharbi, Jacques Monory (Eyes) Alain Pratte (Zoom)

The Shadow of a Doubt — Equation with five unknowns

Because *faits divers* were often bloody crimes, the haemoglobin flowed freely in the cover illustrations of nineteenth-century sensationalist weeklies, publications that were aptly nicknamed canards sanglants (‘bloody canards/ducks’). The term first appeared at the end of the sixteenth century to describe writings that focused on accounts of ‘ghastly tales’. Since then, dripping and splattering blood has constantly permeated cultural representations of *faits divers*. The same bloody visions also inform artistic practices, in which the scarlet liquid smears surfaces, soaks paper and symbolically seeps into fabrics. The public is left in the dark as to the events and people to which these works of blood refer. [...] The *fait divers*, that unclassifiable form of information, thus challenges our understanding, both through the demonstration of unexplained phenomena and through the excessiveness with which social tragedies are recounted. But not every *fait divers* is a crime. In some it is the unprecedented, unheard of or extraordinary nature of the event that amazes.

[...] The *fait divers* sometimes takes on the appearance of a curse, an anomaly, a mysterious and impersonal force. And this fate afflicts not only mankind, but also strikes insects and animals. In fact, one of the jewels in the crown of the crime press, *Le Nouveau Détective*, has a special section devoted to their misfortunes. This chiens écrasés (‘crushed dogs’) section, also known in the nineteenth century as ‘drowned dogs’ or ‘lost dogs’, forged a distinctive literary style, characterised by brevity, word play, and a blend of information and entertainment that prefigured today’s infotainment. It’s a favourite subject for artists who tackle this tragicomic tradition with glee. Humour creeps into the *fait divers*, sometimes at the risk of softening its seriousness.

Exhibit 5 Miniature trunk from the Eyraud-Bompard affair

A sort of “spin-off” produced in large numbers in memory of the murder of Toussaint-Augustin Gouffé in 1889 by two swindlers, Michel Eyraud and Gabrielle Bompard, who, in order to get rid of the body, had it encased in knitted fabric, then sent by train from Paris to Saint-Genis-Laval.

— With artworks by
Jean Le Gac, Virginie Rebetez (Death) David Ancelin, Jérôme Cavalière et Stéphane Déplan, Taroop & Glabel (Gags) Grégory Chatonsky, Agnès Geoffray, Abigail Lane & Mathew Weir, Éric Pougeau, Angela Strassheim (Haemoglobin) Sophie Calle, Claude Closky, Joachim Mogarra (What?) Ismaël Joffroy Chandoutis, Jacques Monory, Julien Prévieux, Antonio Recalcati (Complaint against X)

MAC VAL

Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne — Place de la Libération, Vitry-sur-Seine

FAITS DIVERS

A hypothesis in 26 letters,
5 equations and no answers

15.11.24/13.04.25

Exhibition

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Exhibition

EN

With works of Absalon, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Mac Adams, David Ancelin, Eduardo Arroyo, Julien Audebert, Delphine Balley, Lewis Baltz, Ben, Carole Benzaken, Pascal Bernier, Ode Bertrand, Maurice Blin, Samuel Bollendorff, Christian Boltanski, Corinne May Botz, Véronique Boudier, Halida Boughriet, Mohamed Bourouissa, Xavier Boussiron, Joël Brisse, La Brodeuse masquée, Brognon Rollin, Benoît Broisat, Bureau of Inverse Technology, Sophie Calle, Jérôme Cavalière et Stéphane Déplan, Stephen Chalmers, Grégory Chatonsky, Nicolas Cilins, Claude Closky, Julien Creuzet, Claire Dantzer, Nicolas Daubanes, Nicolas Descottes, Éric Dubuc, Michel François, Sylvain Fraysse, Agnès Geoffray, Camille Gharbi, John Giorno, Ana Maria Gomes, Pierre Huyghe, Ismaël Joffroy Chandoutis, Michel Journiac, Nina Laisné, Abigail Lane & Mathew Weir, Jean Le Gac, David Levinthal, Caroline Macdonald, Marko Mäetamm, Teresa Margolles, Pascale Mijares, Joachim Mogarra, Sabine Monirys, Jacques Monory, Yan Morvan, Natascha Niederstrass, Didier Paquignon, Christian Patterson, Daniel Pommereulle, Éric Pougeau, Alain Pratte, Julien Prévieux, Lidwine Prolonge, André Raffray, Philippe Ramette, Virginie Rebetez, Antonio Recalcati, Jason et Carlos Sanchez, Alain Séchas, Bruno Serralongue, Nancy Spero, Angela Strassheim, Kiran Subbaiah, Taroop & Glabel, Julien Tiberi, Yann Toma, Nils Vandevenne, Cecilia Vicuña, Bob Watts...

Curator Nicolas Surlapierre
Associate curator Vincent Lavoie
Coordinator Julien Blanpied, assisted by Marzia Ferri

“Faits divers – Une hypothèse en 26 lettres, 5 équations et aucune réponse” is an exhibition held at MAC VAL from November 2024 to April 2025. Director Nicolas Surlapierre chose to share curating responsibilities with art historian Vincent Lavoie, a professor at the Université du Québec in Montréal. The catalogue published on this occasion features contributions by leading specialists in the field.

Text by the curators of the exhibition

Nicolas Surlapierre and Vincent Lavoie

Despite real interest in the subject, no exhibition in France has really been devoted to an artistic analysis of the *fait divers*. The exhibition “Faits divers” held at the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in 1982 looked at the subject through the prism of the press and ethnographic objects related to *faits divers*. Similarly, the recent exhibition at the Musée de l’Image in Épinal showed how prints and press illustrations took up *faits divers*, and were for many years the chief means of disseminating them. In the field of art, two exhibitions have shed light on the question. Régis Michel’s *La peinture comme crime* at the Musée du Louvre in 2001, and Jean Clair’s *Crime et châtement* at the Musée d’Orsay in 2010, presented works of art (including 20th century art), but their purview was limited to crime. The exhibition at MAC VAL, on the other hand, will offer a broader, more comprehensive panorama, with a comparative slant, and will play on the principles of enigma and trickery. After all, *faits divers* are as much about stories as they are about worlds and imaginaries.

Without a doubt, Roland Barthes’ “Structure of the *Fait Divers*” (1964) was the inspiration for this exhibition. Described by the semiologist as the “unorganised discard of news” the *fait divers* helps us to name and identify the aberrant causalities and coincidental relationships that disrupt everyday life. If, as Pierre Bourdieu famously put it, the *fait divers* is a diversion, it is also one of the major manifestations of the society of entertainment. But while they may tell us nothing about reality, *faits divers* do suggest its complexity and depth. The *fait divers* is the revelation of the unfatho-

mable mystery of banality. It is the grain of sand that causes dull routine to seize up, brutal anomie, the explosion of violence beneath still waters, the cruelty of good honest folk. It is also the revenge of the obscure, of the nobodies.

The *fait divers* marks a break in the process of civilisation. It is aimed at a literate public, it requires a topical medium, in particular the press and media, and it is now updated on the new communication media, which themselves contribute to the plasticity of its structure and form. It holds a real fascination for artists, who have come up with all kinds of formal outlets and typologies. It can be cruel, funny, comical, ironic and cynical all at the same time. None of the major art movements of the 20th and 21st centuries have escaped the influence and shadow cast by the news item. The exhibition will showcase a wide range of artists working with diverse media and approaches. There will be no fewer than 80 of them, and over a hundred works will be on display. Beyond the illustrative nature of the alphabetical guide, the *fait divers* is also an excellent vehicle for questioning certain protocols and modus operandi in contemporary art. The “fictionalisation” of the so-called minor event, the resonance of the indexical model, the artistic transposition of investigative protocols: reconstitution, inventory and collection, the play of differing temporalities in representations of events, the ethics of testimony and evidentiary discourse, sensationalism and regimes of affect, and finally the effects of authenticity and clashes of opinion will all be evoked in each of the five equations that structure the exhibition.

Because the *faits divers* is often linked to the world of investigation, to a certain form of enigma and to the desire of artists to elucidate the mysterious side of these events, the exhibition is built around the poetry of equations with several unknowns, which are conceived as a cross between parameters and a register of “indexicality.” Each of the equations will be introduced by “exhibits” of the kind presented in court, underpinning the legitimate metaphor of investigation and hinting at the miscarriage of justice or human error at the root of many *faits divers*. The present exhibition is as much a universe of forms as it is a vast lexical field. The thematic guide, which refers to Didier Decoin’s *Dictionnaire amoureux du fait divers* (Éditions Plon, 2022), aims to show the diversity of artists and forms that have taken a close interest in these singular events, with their indefinable and indecisive intimations. It will also highlight the impact of the visual culture of the *faits divers* on contemporary art. In 26 letters and 5 equations, the exhibition will present a hypothesis of what a *fait divers* is, but will be careful not to impose an answer. It will leave everyone free to make up their own minds, to have their own doubts, or simply to let themselves be carried away by the delights of fabrication and speculation.

A powerful catalyst for emotions (compassion, pleasure, curiosity, identification), the *fait divers* has a fantasy value that plays a part in dramaturgy and contemporary art. The number and variety of these artistic practices encourages us to analyse the status of this subject in contemporary art. This exhibition examines the ways in which this protean category of narrative is transposed into contemporary art. The aim is not so much to examine the place occupied by *faits divers* and events of a criminal nature

Five equations and 26 alphabetical hypotheses structure the exhibition

Texts by Vincent Lavoie

In the name of the law — Equation with one unknown

A *fait divers* is a departure from established norms, all the more so if it constitutes a crime. In such cases, the public authorities, the legal system and the police all take action to re-establish a social balance that has been disrupted by the event. Relayed by the media, transformed by public opinion and sometimes amplified by political commentary, these representations spread through artistic practices that metabolise them as new addictive substances. One of the adjuncts

Vincent Lavoie is a professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal. His publications include *Photojournalismes. Revoir les canons de l’image de presse* (Hazan, 2010), *La preuve par l’image* (PUQ, 2017), *L’affaire Capa. Le procès d’une icône* (Éditions Textuel, 2017), *Trop mignon! Mythologies du cute* (PUF, 2020) and *Facing Black Star* (RIC Books/The MIT Press, 2023), in collaboration with Thierry Gervais. He is principal investigator of the ‘Visualités du bien-être animal’ research project (SSHRC).

in the history of art as to analyse their various occurrences in artistic creation from the 1960s to the present day. More fundamentally, the exhibition seeks to examine the links between contemporary art and the imaginary world of the news, which artists not only illustrate or document in their own way, but also reinvent.

In the mathematical sciences they are variables and correspond quite neatly with the world of enigmas to be solved. They sum up artists’ desire to elucidate the enigmas that are sometimes or often subjacent to a *fait divers* and transform the museum’s temporary exhibition rooms into a vast board game, in reference to the famous game. Each equation brings together 5 or 6 letters from the alphabet. They break with alphabetical order, so that visitors can grasp the lexical field of “diversified facts,” the main themes, the diversity of responses proposed by the artists and the issues of reception. The equations describe broad categories or archetypes: “In the name of the law” (equation with one unknown), “Disaster scenario” (equation with two unknowns), “Doing violence” (equation with three unknowns), “Open your eyes” (equation with four unknowns), “The shadow of a doubt” (equation with five unknowns).

MAC VAL

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Publication

Faits divers. Une hypothèse en 26 lettres, 5 équations et aucune réponse.

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