PRESS RELEASE

MONTAGNE MAGIQUE

MYSTIQUE

MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS LE LOCLE

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# Table of Contents

**An Ode to Nature**
Nathalie Herschdorfer  
Page 3

**Montagne Magique Mystique**
Treasures of Photography from Swiss Collections  
Page 4

**Mauren Brodbeck**
Anima  
Page 8

**Rudy Decelière**
Permeabilité magnétique du vide ≠2  
Page 10

**Looking at the Landscape**
From the collection  
Page 11

**Anastasia Samoylova**
Grand Canyons  
Page 13

**Ester vonplon**
Flügelschlag  
Page 14

**Events**  
Page 16

**Press Images**  
Page 17

**Publications**  
Page 21

**Partners**  
Page 22

**Admissions**  
Page 23

**Press Contact**  
Page 23
AN ODE TO NATURE

In response to a year of rediscovering the landscapes around us, by force of circumstance, MBAL celebrates the mountains as a popular destination for the Swiss, as well as for like-minded visitors from abroad. The natural landscape, a source of inspiration for artists for many centuries, is at the heart of our programming. The exhibition MONTAGNE MAGIQUE MYSTIQUE draws on the historical photographic holdings of 18 public and private collections in Switzerland, and reveals rare daguerreotypes, a variety of print media, albums and related objects which have mostly never been previously shown. Inspired by painters who depicted majestic Alpine panoramas, the first photographers took their heavy equipment with them on their Alpine adventures. Mountain photography developed in the 19th century in close parallel with mountaineering, responding to the image needs of a fast-emerging tourism industry. Although 19th-century photographers struggled with difficult conditions, working with cumbersome equipment that forced them to carry chemicals, glass plates and darkroom tents up and down daunting cliffs, they managed to produce extraordinary images, while offering a variety of novel viewpoints and perspectives. The exhibition bears witness to the infatuation of the first generations of photographers with the high peaks: until then they had been seen as dangerous and inaccessible spaces, but now, thanks to the efforts of the pioneers, they were increasingly seen as places of glorious nature and intoxicating beauty. The exhibition pays tribute not only to the artists who often risked their lives to photograph the power of the mountains, but also to the institutional and private collectors who have preserved their images to this day.

Today, contemporary practice reveals itself in a deconstruction and questioning of the very notion of landscape. Some artists work directly in nature, others react to ecological concerns or directly seize the plants to experiment with new artistic processes. The MBAL has invited 4 contemporary artists to intervene in relation to this theme: MAUREN BRODBECK (Switzerland, 1974) makes her works float in space; the natural landscape allows her to question the intangible. RUDY DECELLIÈRE (Switzerland/France, 1979), made up of large dry grasses that quiver thanks to magnets and a network of copper wires, is experienced through the sounds and vibrations it generates with paintings from the MBAL collection. ESTER VONPLON (Switzerland, 1980) creates photograms with photographic paper dating from 1907. Her images take on unexpected forms due to the aging process. Finally, ANASTASIA SAMOYLOVA (Russia/USA, 1984) has created a monumental installation for the facade of the MBAL. Her mural piece evokes the Grand Canyon against the backdrop of climate change.

Of course, contemplating nature is not just a matter of seeing pictures. The MBAL invites its visitors to continue their visit of the museum by going to the heart of the Jura landscape. In September 2021, the 6th edition of the contemporary photography festival Alt. +1000 will be held in the valley of La Brévine. To complete these exhibitions devoted to landscape, the MBAL is publishing an original text by the Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia, author of the remarkable essays The life of plants and Metamorphoses. Happy exploring!

Nathalie Herschdorfer
Director
Photography, born in the 19th century, accompanied the discovery of the mountains. The year following its invention, the first photographers set up their darkrooms in the middle of the Alpine landscape. Most of them were enlightened amateurs, passionate about the new medium, which offered images of extraordinary precision. To record and fix the image from the action of light, a good knowledge of chemistry and physics was required. The first photographic process, developed in 1839 and called the daguerreotype, dominated the market until 1850. Requiring long exposure times and producing a single image, the daguerreotype is a photograph on a thin copper plate coated with silver. Although only a handful of daguerreotypes of the Alps were produced in the 1840s, mostly at medium altitudes, and even fewer survive, some images were reproduced in albums as engravings and lithographs. Throughout the 19th century, photographers made numerous technical improvements to the process, notably moving from the single metal plate of the daguerreotype to the negative, which allowed images to be produced on paper in large quantities. The various stages of development were also gradually simplified, and exposure times reduced. The metal plates were replaced by glass plates, covered with a layer of photographic emulsion, and then developed in a chemical bath. With the invention of the negative-positive process, photography became reproducible: the image produced on the glass plate was then printed on photosensitive paper, known as albumen.
From the mid-19th century onwards, it was possible to produce unlimited numbers of prints. This led to a boom in the photographic market and publishers specialised in photographic views, distributing their images in albums which they sold to a curious public at home and abroad. Faster and cheaper than in its early days, photography became accessible to the greatest number of people and was eventually taken on all journeys.

As the profession of photography developed in the 1850s, particularly as a result of the craze for photographic portraiture, many amateurs with the means to buy equipment learned to master the new medium. Among the first photographers were artists who saw it as a quick and efficient way to develop images, but also doctors, engineers and pharmacists with a penchant for science who were fascinated by the medium. From the late 1840s onwards, photographic equipment was taken on excursions: mountaineers in particular saw it as a way of sharing their passion for the mountains. As for professional photographers, they were integrated into the scientific missions of discovery of new territories, and brought back to the public unpublished images of the exploration of the high peaks. It isn't barely an exaggeration to say that the Alps were invaded by photographers in the decades following the invention of the process. Although they struggled with difficult conditions, working with cumbersome equipment that in the early years required them to carry chemicals, glass plates and darkroom tents along cliffs, photographers managed to produce extraordinary images, offering a variety of viewpoints, sometimes offering panoramic views, sometimes focusing on seracs, glacial caves, gorges and waterfalls. But not all the photographers set out to conquer the high peaks. Some stayed at mid-altitude and photographed the mountain people, their habitats and their way of life. Geologists photographed rock formations and ice seas, beginning to document glacial movements scientifically, while civil engineers were interested in the infrastructure that opened up new routes through the mountains, such as the railway. The exhibition shows the enthusiasm of the first generations of photographers for mountain landscapes in particular. Corresponding to the first 100 years of the history of photography, the period 1840-1940 shows the fundamental change in attitude towards the high peaks: this wild and dangerous space is suddenly perceived as a place of glorious nature and great beauty. The air is pure compared to the dark and unhealthy environment that develops in the cities. People went to the mountains for treatment and to distance themselves from the hustle and bustle of the city. Sanatoriums were founded in Switzerland at the end of the 19th century. Altitude cures were prescribed to patients who were recommended to engage in outdoor activities and to expose themselves to the sun. Thus, the mountains were symbolically associated with the health of the body, which in turn was associated with spiritual health.

This period also coincides with the golden age of mountaineering, when all the great peaks were climbed. Explorations were adventurous not only in the Alps, which in the 19th century were still a territory to be discovered, but also on all other continents, from Africa to the Arctic, from New Zealand to the Andes, from Alaska to Tibet.
Climbing became an expression of male virility: the mountains had to be "conquered". It was then that specialised alpine clubs were born: the first was founded in England in 1857, the Swiss Alpine Club was born 6 years later. Once the challenge of conquering the Alps was over, the focus shifted to Everest and K2, nicknamed the "wild mountain" because of the difficulty of its ascent. Jules Jacot-Guillarmod, a doctor from Neuchâtel, was one of the first to attempt to climb the world's second highest peak in 1902. He brought back many pictures.

Finally, it was also in the late 19th Century that tourism developed with all its infrastructure: roads and railways, with their bridges and tunnels, steamships, hotels and related tourist services. Photographic imagery accompanied this development, as did mountaineering: stereoscopic views (the forerunner of 3D) became wildly popular, with millions of copies sold, while the first photographic postcards appeared in 1870, allowing people to travel vicariously through the image. In the space of a few decades, photography became central to all human activities, whether commercial, documentary, scientific or artistic. Hundreds of thousands of mountain photographs were taken between 1840 and 1940: the trickle rapidly became an avalanche, and many of those images were then reproduced in great numbers. While many originals have disappeared over time, thousands of prints have survived in various collections. Not surprisingly, the Swiss in particular have a penchant for such images. However, the passion is widely shared beyond our borders—as a place representing the sublime, or merely the picturesque, the mountains offer myriad possibilities for aesthetic exploration by photographers, who have learned over the decades to deftly capture the nuances of bright light and deep shadow. The technical limitations (the image in black and white and not in colour, the large format negatives requiring technical know-how) are quickly diverted to the benefit of a strong aesthetic. In this respect, the approach to landscape photography by the American Ansel Adams is still being emulated in the digital age. Mountain photography has become a genre in itself—though its parameters are somewhat blurred—not only because of the aesthetic pleasures it allows, but also because of what it represents: a natural realm to be protected, while remaining a territory to be tamed and explored. These diverse and contradictory approaches are at the heart of 'mountain photography', suggesting an aesthetic and moral issue that combines physical hardship and suffering while offering a sense of identity and space for contemplation. Many are the photographers who have directly or indirectly tackled this theme. What characterises early mountain photography is an eminently photographic work on the territory and the limit.

And it is certain that in the 21st century the genre has lost none of its powers of concentration.

William A. Ewing and Nathalie Herschdorfer
Curators:
William A. Ewing with Nathalie Herschdorfer

Focusing on the first 100 years of the history of photography, the MBAL’s research reveals more than 200 photographs, many of which have never been shown to the public. To produce this exhibition, the museum collaborated with 18 Swiss public and private collections.

Bibliothèque de la Ville de la Chaux-de-Fonds
Bibliothèque nationale suisse, Berne
Collection Daniel Schwartz
Collection Doy Young et Gaudenz F. Domenig
Collection Nicolas Crispini
Collection Richard de Tscharner
Collection Thomas Walther
Fondation Auer Ory pour la photographie, Hermance
Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur
Médiathèque Valais – Martigny
Musée Alpin Suisse, Berne
Musée d’art et d’histoire, Neuchâtel
Musée des beaux-arts, Le Locle
Musée gruérien, Bulle
Musée national suisse, Zurich
Musée suisse de l’appareil photographique, Vevey
Museo d’arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano
Zentralbibliothek, Soleure

The exhibition was supported by the Fondation Le Cèdre, the Fondation Philanthropique Famille Sandoz and the Contrôle des Métaux Précieux.
«Anima» is a Latin word meaning soul and breath. It evokes both inner dialogue and imagination. By making her works float in space, Mauren Brodbeck plunges us into the heart of nature through her filter – her palette of colours, modified images, and an unusual sound environment. By creating such a singular visual and sound space, the artist invites the public to enter a garden that evokes a dream landscape rather than a realistic documentation of nature. With *Anima*, Brodbeck explores materials, colours, textures and sounds, both in the image and sound. The plant world is put into a vibratory state, because it must appeal to our senses and emotions. The artist’s visual and sound variations can be developed endlessly. By moving away from a traditional representation of nature, she invites us to enter into a relationship with a different type of plant environment. Through this immersive space, the artist encourages each of us to let our intuition carry us along. If Brodbeck disturbs what we know of nature, it is because she seeks to create a connection with the invisible, or rather the intangible. *Anima* takes us beyond the surface of the plant world - a surface that has literally been digitally transformed. Capturing sounds during the creative process is essential for Mauren Brodbeck: scratching photographs or physical contact with the plants contributes to the exploration of the material. The exhibition space thus constitutes an environment where the soundscape echoes the visual landscape, and vice versa. As you walk through this space, you are invited to listen to your own feelings. Conceived as a garden suspended in time and space, Brodbeck’s work refers to the traditional symbolism of the garden: between contemplation and pleasure, it is also a sacred space and a possibility to reconnect with an intimate world.
With this installation, Brodbeck reinterprets a common experience: the walk in nature. Her garden sparkles to better address our emotions and sensibilities. Finally, Anima is also an exploration of the «Anima Mundi»: described by philosophers as the soul of the world, it consists of seeing nature as a living being, or rather a divine essence that encompasses and energises every life in the universe.

BIOGRAPHY

Mauren Brodbeck (Switzerland, 1974) lives and works in Geneva. Describing herself as a “multi-sensory” artist, her work combines visual and auditory elements to create reinterpretations of everyday experiences. With her multidimensional works, she wishes to invite the public to reconsider their relationship with the environment around them. Her training began at the Vancouver Film School in Canada. She then obtained a Bachelor’s degree in photography at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. She then went on to complete a post-graduate degree at the Haute école d’art et de design (HEAD) in Geneva, where she studied interactive arts and new media. Since 2005, her work has been exhibited in Switzerland and abroad, notably in Germany, France and the United States, and has been shown at various fairs, such as Paris Photo and the Berliner Liste. Brodbeck also founded Raw and Radical, a project that aims to connect and support women artists through a series of podcasts.
The installation of Rudy Decelière (Switzerland/France, 1979) consists of large dry grasses that quiver thanks to magnets and a network of copper wires. It is experienced through the sounds and vibrations it generates with the paintings of the MBAL collection.

Rudy Decelière's interest lies in the translation of imperceptible phenomena through perceptual sound experiences. He makes electric and electromagnetic fields audible, and never stops exploring the thresholds of what is perceptible. At the crossroads of nature and mechanics, of scientific formulation and poetic evocation, *Perméabilité magnétique du vide #2* evokes an island of semi-artificial grassland, whose tall grasses sway in the wind. Each blade of grass, dried and then surrounded by a magnet, is then placed in front of a copper coil. The wires are then connected to each other, diffusing the acoustic characteristics of a landscape. Rudy Decelière continues his reflection on sounds and the relationship or limits they have with space and place. By playing with the movement of these tall grasses to create this barely perceptible, continuously broadcast sound atmosphere, the artist invites the visitor to take the time to let himself be carried along, to listen and to feel. His work is nourished here by the extreme intensity of the silence of the mountain, in all its invisibility, mystique, sublimity, disquiet and magic.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Rudy Decelière, graduated of the École des Beaux-Arts de Genève - now the Haute école d’art et de design (HEAD) - where he settled at the end of the 1990s, explores sound art mainly through the medium of installation. His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions in various Swiss cultural institutions such as the Ferme Asile in Sion, the Kunstmuseum in Olten, the CERN in Geneva, the Musée Jenisch in Vevey and the Abbatiale de Bellelay.
LOOKING AT THE LANDSCAPE
FROM THE COLLECTION

The exhibition presents a selection of paintings from the MBAL collection relating to the world of mountains. The Alps are in dialogue with the Jura peaks, bringing together painters from the end of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century. These include Claire Pasch-Battié, François-Marc-Eugène Gos, Alexandre Perrier, Maurice Mathey, Robert Fernier and Charles L’Éplattenier.

The exhibition takes the form of an ascent to the Matterhorn, beginning on the left with paintings of the Jura and leading to the Alps. Three portraits of Alexandre Girod punctuate the wall: his Paysan jurassien begins the climb, while in the centre, L’Alpiniste - one of the few Alpine representations of the painter - rests admiring the landscape, a snowy peak emerging from the clouds over his shoulder and finally, a mystic who has reached the summit is immersed in his reading. The realistic representation of the landscape (Aurèle Barraud, Edouard Castres, Emma Favre-Bulle) or of the powerful relief given to the rock (Albert Fahrny, Charles L’Éplattenier) gradually gives way to an idealisation of nature (Robert Fernier, Maurice Mathey), then to a form of mystical and spiritual elevation of the mountain (Claire Pasch-Battié, François-Marc-Eugène Gos, Jean Thiébaud). Beyond their formal divergences, the painters presented here follow a similar approach to the subject by directly confronting the site. The relationship between humans and the mountain has always been complex, humans being both the ones who mark it and the ones who are marked by it. From 1890 onwards, Switzerland witnessed a revival of interest in the genre of alpine painting. The domesticated Alps remain a source of fear, whose beauty is both attractive and repulsive.
Jean Thiébaud depicts a monumental Cervin in front of which human being realises his vulnerability and the brevity of his existence. The same is true of Charles L’Eplattenier’s Col du Théodule, which plays on the effects of light and the rendering of space to elevate the landscape to the level of a mystical representation, accentuated by the absence of any trace of humanity. Both paintings invite us to meditate on the grandeur of nature and take on an allegorical and spiritual dimension, the mountain becoming an inaccessible divinity. Hence the tension between realism and idealism that is characteristic of Helvetic symbolism, and which undoubtedly constitutes the strength of these works.
The MBAL invited the Russian-born artist Anastasia Samoylova to create a new installation for the museum's facade. Her mural piece evokes the Grand Canyon against the backdrop of climate change. For several years the artist, who now lives in the United States, has been creating monumental installations in parallel with her practice as a documentary photographer. *Grand Canyons*, created in 2021, is part of the *Landscape Sublime* series begun in 2013. In the series the artist explores the way in which images from social networks respond to popular pictorial motifs and illustrate a certain idea of nature and environment. To create her collages, Samoylova collects royalty-free images from the Internet and re-photographs them in the form of cubist paintings. Captured by amateur photographers, most of them are often majestic: the saturated colours and compositions correspond to the expected conventions of calendar-type tourist imagery. The artist uploads her images using keywords that then become the titles of her works. In her studio, she prints, then cuts, folds, and assembles the found views. Letting improvisation carry her compositions in a three-dimensional way, Samoylova is inspired by the work of the Russian avant-garde, in particular by the constructivist artist Liubov Popova. Her relationship to popular images is influenced by the Pop Art of Robert Rauschenberg and by postmodernism.

*Grand Canyons* consists of typical views of the famous landscapes of the American West, as well as historical photographs from the Grand Canyon National Park online library, from images of hiking trails and hilltop vistas to those of tour groups and native animals. Both the park's official archives and images shared on social medias contain photographs of wildfires that have occurred in recent years. As the fire season increases in length each year due to climate change, the growing number of fire images uploaded to the internet is a silent reminder of what could be lost if land use continues at the same rate. Samoylova's work thus explores notions of environmentalism, consumerism and the picturesque. With the series *Landscape Sublime*, she looks at one of the most pressing issues of this century: climate change. Her images' composition captures the state of a nature that is sinking towards catastrophe and reveals the role that photography plays in creating collective memories and imaginary geographies.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Anastasia Samoylova (Russia/USA, 1984) lives and works between Miami and New York. She received a Master of Fine Arts from Bradley University and a Master of Environmental Design from the Russian State University for the Humanities. Her latest project, *FloodZone* (2020), was published by Steidl and exhibited in Tampa, USA. Samoylova's work has been noted by the international press, including *Artforum*, *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *El Pais*, *Die Presse-Schaufenster* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. She has received a number of grants. Her work is in the collections of the Perez Art Museum in Miami, the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago and the Wilhelm-Hack Museum in Germany.
Ester Vonplon’s herbarium is a collection of leaves, flowers and stems saved from the ephemeral. Each of these plants was exposed to the sun on photosensitive paper, so that their imprint could be deposited on it. No camera was used. In large format, the works acquire a strong iconic presence; in small format, they affirm their fragility.

Photogenic drawing was born with the invention of photography. Developed in England by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1834, it became the first photographic process that made possible to obtain negative images on paper. The first photogenic drawings were obtained by contact with the flat object to be reproduced (plants, fabrics, drawings, etc.) according to the photogram technique. Botanists were among the first to adopt this process because photography, from its very beginnings, promised the meticulous reproduction of detailed forms. The Englishwoman Anna Atkins, an amateur botanist as well as an accomplished watercolourist and lithographer, was a pioneer in photography. Her «British Algae : Cyanotype Impressions» is now considered the first book of photographs in history (1843), having come out a few months before that of William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the paper negative that led to photography. Atkins’ book contains more than 400 plates, all executed on iron salt-sensitised paper which gives her herbarium an intense blue colour. Her photograms, made by cyanotype, one of the oldest non-silver monochrome processes, make Atkins the first female photographer in history. Vonplon’s work seems to be directly related to her legacy. Her work seems to be a direct descendant of her heritage, with the same wonderment at the magic of photography in its power to reproduce nature.
Vonplon creates her photograms with photographic paper dating from 1907. Her images take on an unexpected form due to the aging process. In sunlight, the light-sensitive paper, which has been stored in the dark for over a hundred years, changes colour within a few hours. The plants leave blurred shadows, as the artist let them move on the paper in the wind. The images revealed by direct exposure on photographic paper are evanescent: the print seems so fragile as to risk disappearing. For Vonplon, photography is an experiment and a tool of poetry. The imprint, the trace, the silhouette interest the artist more than photographic precision. If she has entitled her series Flügelschlag (Wingbeat), it is because nature reveals itself in its vulnerability.

BIOGRAPHY

Ester Vonplon (Swiss, 1980) lives and works in Castrisch, Canton Graubünden. She studied photography in Berlin and obtained a Master’s degree at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Her work has been awarded several times, among others with the Manor Cultural Prize in 2017. Vonplon has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur, the Kunstmuseum in Thun, the Museum Allerheiligen in Schaffhausen, FOAM in Amsterdam, FOMU in Antwerp, the Dafen Art Museum in Shenzhen, China, and the Rencontres d’Arles, France. Her art projects are often inspired by the Alpine landscape and the surrounding nature.
EVENTS

The range of events will be expanded in line with the health situation. Informations on https://www.mbal.ch/agenda/

GUIDED TOURS
Sundays 9 May, 6 & 20 June, 4 July, 15 August et 26 September at 2:30 pm
Places are limited, registration required
Included in the entrance ticket

MEET THE ARTIST
Sunday 13 June at 11 pm and 1 am
Around the work of Carmen Perrin
In the presence of the artist
Included in the entrance ticket

LA GRANDE TABLE
Sunday 20 June at 11 pm
Le corps noir : représentation dans l'art d'hier et d'aujourd'hui
The MBAL invites various specialists for a panel discussion.
In the presence of Pap Ndiaye, Director of the Palais de la Porte Dorée, specialist in black American history and the sociology of black populations in France.
Places are limited, registration required
Admission free, followed by a brunch
This event is organized in collaboration with Galerie C
MONTAGNE MAGIQUE MYSTIQUE
PRESS IMAGES

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Adolphe Braun, Grindelwald, Quelle der Lüschine, 1867. © Collection Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur

Albert Nyfeler, Transport du bois pour la construction du chalet de Hans Lehner, Lauchernalp, 1936. © Albert Nyfeler, Médiathèque Valais – Martigny

Auguste Garcin, Traversée de la mer de glace, Chamonix, vers 1865, épreuve albuminée. © Collection Crispini, Genève

Auguste-Rosalie Bisson, La crevasse sur le chemin du Grand Plateau, 1861, épreuve albuminée. © Collection Crispini, Genève

Emile Gos, Obergabelhorn, vers 1920. © Emile Gos, Médiathèque Valais – Martigny

Jean Gaberell, Am Gallina, vers 1920. © Courtesy Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur
MAUREN BRODBECK · PRESS IMAGES

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© Mauren Brodbeck, Anima Flora, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Anima, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Deep Convolution, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Discomposure, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Fantomatic Discomposure, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Eternal Convolution, 2021
© Mauren Brodbeck, Fragment, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Monochrome Stalkion, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Muted Fragment, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Pink Agitation, 2021

© Mauren Brodbeck, Silent Agitation, 2021.
ESTER VONPLON · PRESS IMAGES

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© Ester Vonplon, from the series Flügelschlag, 2020

© Ester Vonplon, from the series Flügelschlag, 2020

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PUBLICATIONS

Photographic works 2004-2014

Mauren Brodbeck
Published by Drago (French and English editions)
Pages: 170
Publication date: 2014
ISBN: 978-8-898-56507-8

Espaces compris

Vincent Barras, Stéphane Cecconi, Rudy Decelière, Carmen Perrin
Published by La Baconnière Arts
Pages: 139
Publication date: 2014

FloodZone

Anastasia Samoylova
Published by Steidl
Pages: 136
Publication date: 2019
ISBN 978-3-95829-633-6

Lowlands

Ester Vonplon
Published by IIKKI
Pages: 122
Publication date: 2017
PARTNERS


In 2021, the MBAL’s exhibitions received support from the Loterie Romande.

The exhibition Montagne Magique Mystique was supported by the Fondation Le Cèdre, the Fondation Philanthropique Famille Sandoz and the Contrôle des Métaux Précieux.
ADMISSIONS

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HOURS
Wed – Sun, 11.00 AM – 5.00 PM

PRICES
Adults: CHF. 8.-
Senior citizens, students, apprentices, unemployed: CHF. 5.-
Children, young people under 16 and art students: free
First Sunday of the month: free

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