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PRESS RELEASE

THE FIRST PHOTOS. UNTIL PROVEN OTHERWISE

**EXHIBITION CURATED BY
FRANCESCA SERAVALLE**

**3RD OCTOBER 2026 – 21ST FEBRUARY 2027
OPENING ON OCTOBER 2ND**



The first digital image, or rather, the first photograph with pixels.
A scanned image of Walden, the son of the inventor Russell Kirsch, 1957.

For the autumn 2026 season, marking the Bicentenary of Photography, the MBAL is delighted to present the exhibition *The First Photos. Until Proven Otherwise*. This project, led by curator and artist Francesca Seravalle, is centred on the study of the earliest photographs. From this perspective, each 'first photograph' acts as the tip of an iceberg, an intriguing story that seeps into the mind, prompting deep reflection on the medium.

Far from being merely an archiving criterion, the concept of the 'first photograph' represents a performative approach to the origins of photography. The aim is to recapture the authentic aura of that primordial moment in a society where the single image is under threat from the overabundance of photographic output.

As it captures an inaugural experience, every 'first' possesses an epiphanic quality and becomes a milestone in the cultural revolution. This project challenges the fixed nature of traditional historiography. The history of photography evolves not only into the future, but also into the past: through a process of archaeological excavation, new 'first' photographs are constantly being discovered. The exhibition thus explores a definition

of photography as fluid, both in terms of its technological nature and its social impact. The history of photography is, above all, a social and human history. If it were not used on a daily basis as a primary medium, it would be relegated to a laboratory, just like a microscope. This is why the narrative is explored through visual rather than chronological themes (the family, nature, the fathers of photography, social circles), as human history is made up of life cycles.

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By placing masters and anonymous technicians, iconic images and laboratory tests on an equal footing, Francesca Seravalle demonstrates that photography is a record that preserves the *hic et nunc* of its society. She constructs theories like houses of cards to reveal the unexpected. She questions the inventors of the Web, Photoshop and copy-and-paste to find the earliest photographs, until proven otherwise. Sometimes, she hopes to be proven wrong: it is only through error that research progresses.

The project aims to spark the public's curiosity and sense of wonder about the origins of photography through a thematic, interactive exhibition enriched by a contemporary research approach.



The first photo sent from a mobile phone.

Sophie, the daughter of inventor Philippe Kahn. 11th June 1997, at the Sutter Health maternity hospital in Santa Cruz, California.

Visitors will be invited to explore the 'firsts' of photography: through various subjects presented as small 'paper totems', viewed through the lens of Eros or the early days of erotic photography, by highlighting pioneering works, and by linking the history of photography with social history through portraits. This exploration places a fundamental emphasis on the search for evidence attesting to the authenticity and origins of the earliest photographs.

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FRANCESCA SERAVALLE CURATOR

Francesca Seravalle is an internationally renowned author and curator. Her work explores the ecology of images through the decontextualisation and analysis of archival material. She has recently published her new book, *The Pixel*, which examines the history of the pixel and its interactions with the political, historical and artistic spheres of the 20th century, while questioning the reciprocal influence between contemporary society and imaging techniques.

Her recent work includes the conception of *The Performing Photobook*, simultaneously an exhibition and fair exploring the sensory and ASMR dimensions of the photobook, presented as part of Format23. Her professional career has led her to collaborate with major institutions and figures in the field of photography, such as Magnum Photos Paris, Erik Kessels and the Archive of Modern Conflict.

After heading up the conservation and archiving team at Fabrica (Benetton), she taught at the Istituto Marangoni in London and at London South Bank University. She has been invited to give lectures on conservation and photographic appropriation at several universities, including ECAL, UCL, Glasgow College, UWE Bristol, IMT and Officine Fotografiche. As an exhibition curator, Francesca Seravalle is committed to supporting artists throughout the creative process, from conceptualisation to the final realisation. This approach has resulted in the organisation of exhibitions at renowned venues (Maxxi, Triennale, Photographers' Gallery, Foam, CNA, IMA Gallery) and the publication of books.

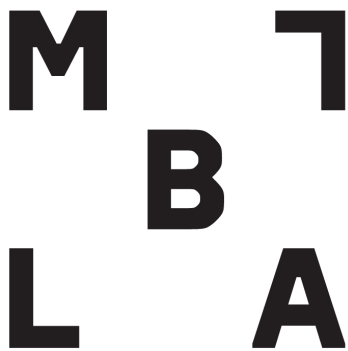
Her work also extends to video art, created for institutions such as the Venice Museum of Modern Art (Ca' Pesaro) and the Bevilacqua La Masa. As part of her research, she has showcased the physical archives of these institutions, notably through an exhibition on lace for Suzhou Design Week. In addition and in collaboration with Feeling Venice, she has created a sensory archives of the lagoon's intangible heritage for the Vittorio Cini Foundation – a project presented at the 2022 Venice Film Biennale. Her curatorial project *Until Proven Otherwise* was awarded the Paul Hill Prize in the UK.



The first photograph taken by a camera.

Regarded as the very first photograph, this version was recreated by the Swiss artist Helmut Gersheim, based on Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras*, 1826 (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas, Austin).

The short films she has directed have been screened at prestigious events and festivals, including the Venice Film Biennale, the London Photo Fair, Photo Saint Germain, UNSEEN Amsterdam and Suzhou Design Week (China). Alongside her curatorial and teaching work, she uses social media as a platform for sharing archival material relating to the history of cinema.



THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS LE LOCLE

The Museum of Fine Arts Le Locle – MBAL is a leading institution in Switzerland with an international reputation, thanks to its bold and accessible programme. The museum presents monographic and thematic exhibitions that offer a variety of perspectives bringing together art from the past and present, from here and elsewhere, and fostering a dialogue between the works from its collection and contemporary Swiss and international art.

Located in the centre of Le Locle and founded in 1862, the MBAL is housed in a magnificent Art Nouveau building renovated in 2014. It boasts 800 m² of exhibition space as well as a virtual platform dedicated to digital art, ORBIT_E. The collection comprises some 5,000 paintings, sculptures and works on paper by Swiss and international artists, dating from the 17th century to the present day. It also includes prestigious loans from the Swiss Confederation and the Gottfried Keller Foundation.

From 2022 to 2026, under the direction of curator and writer Federica Chiocchetti (PhD), the MBAL has pursued an acquisition policy mindful of gender equality issues, with the aim of achieving parity, alongside an inclusive programme of exhibitions and events. Starting Since August 2026, the museum is directed by curator and art critic Jill Gasparina.



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PRESS CONTACTS

FOUCHARD FILIPPI COMMUNICATIONS

Philippe FOUCHARD-FILIPPI

phff@fouchardfilippi.com

+ 33 1 53 28 87 53 / + 33 6 60 21 11 94

www.fouchardfilippi.com

Musée des Beaux-Arts Le Locle

Océane Amblet

oceane.amblet@ne.ch

+41 (0)32 933 89 53

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Musée des Beaux-Arts Le Locle

Marie-Anne-Calame 6, CH – 2400 Le Locle

+41 (0)32 933 89 50 – mbal@ne.ch – www.

mbal.ch – @mbaleloclle

Wednesday- Sunday: 11 a.m. - 5 p.m.

First Sunday of the month: Free admission