

Through my Artistic PhD at Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK) I investigate photography not as a representational technology but as an ontological event. My doctoral research is born from material inquiries, happenings constituted by the encounters of matter and light on a surface. These materials are frequently unstable and reactive, creating “images” which mutate, dissolve, or swell up. And while photographic surfaces are most commonly associated with the light sensitive coatings of silver gelatin paper or analog negatives, light sensitive properties are not contingent upon manmade chemicals. Rather, they are locatable on a Swiss glacier, in bread mold, or in the numerical data of a sensor.

With this in mind, my PhD work and artistic practice argues for an expanded conception of photography - one that is inseparable from the material conditions of its own making. The surfaces I work with reveal the moment in which an image is situated — before it is abstracted, captioned, or mobilized as a placeholder within technical systems. By insisting on its own ‘here-ness,’ my artworks attempt to show what photography looks like when it refuses fungibility or rejects standing in as a proxy for anything beyond its own emergence.

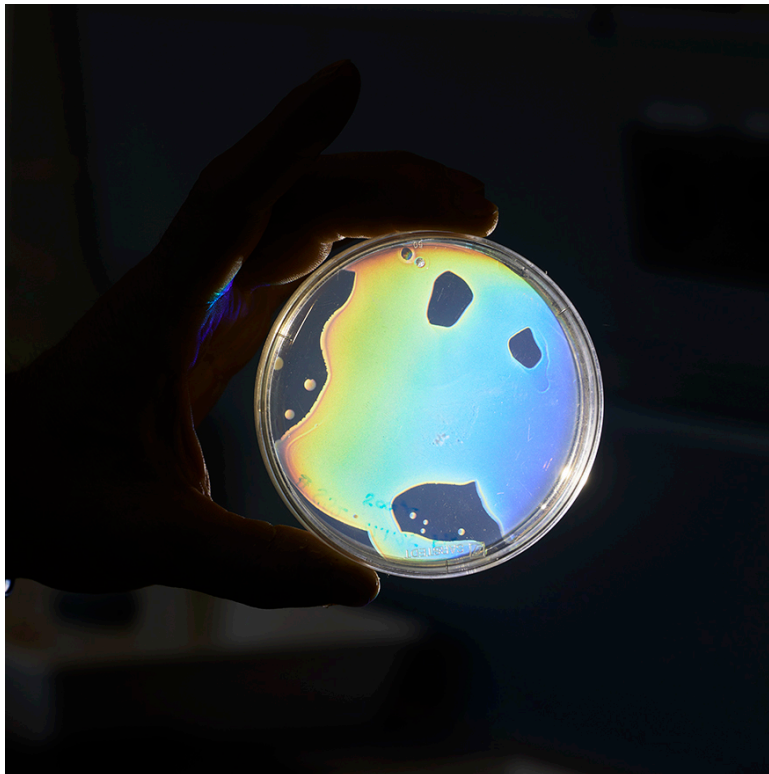


Moonfish (Installation Day 1 & Day 15), 2016
Glass Vitrines, Agar Agar, Paper, Moon fish, Eggs, Tanzanite Blue
Photo Oil, Coffee, Beeswax, Olive Oil

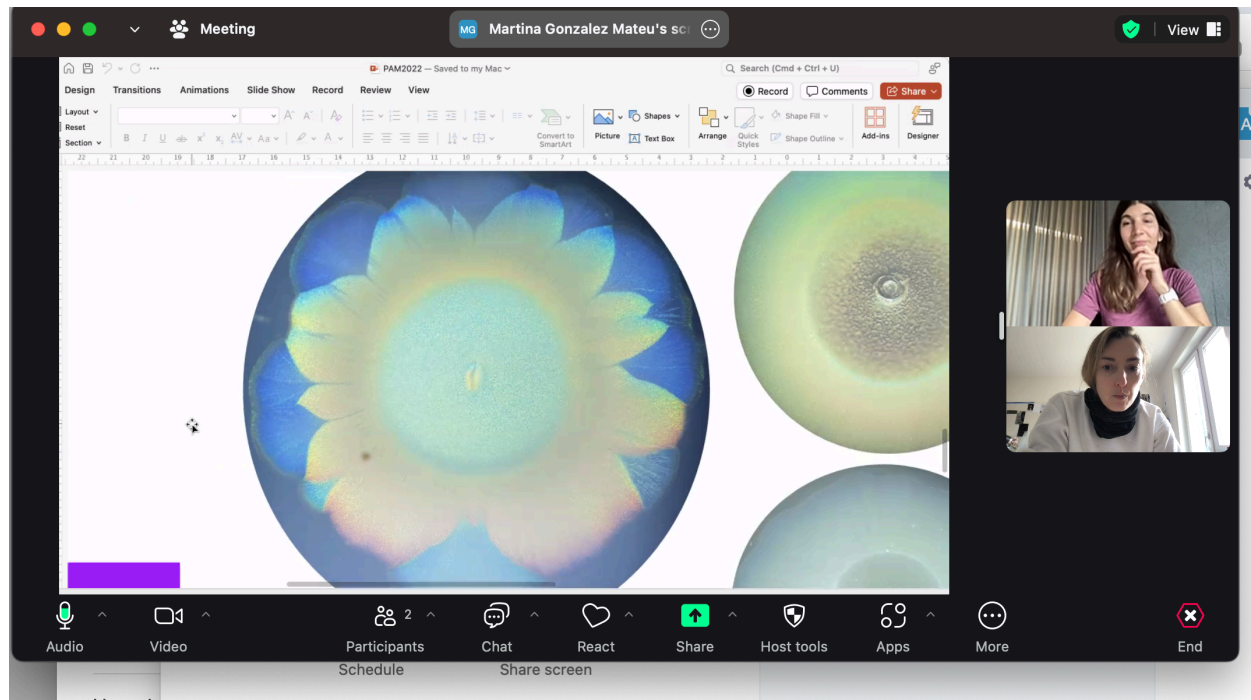
Photography’s implicit connection to representation often generates the assumption that an image is a substitute for a scene or locality — a form of proxy seeing. Yet the organisms and substrates I engage with in my studio-laboratory refuse this rational. Bacterial blooms, algae growths, or gelatin emulsions behave unpredictably, shifting in relation to exposure, humidity, or contagions. The resulting images are not representations so much as responses which cannot be contained or read as fully legible. These surfaces trouble the assumption that a photograph is a stable surrogate for a place. Instead, they reveal the unreliability of photographic substitution and challenge the placeholder logic which underpins many contemporary imaging systems.

My studio practice's relevance to the theme "Placeholders" lies precisely in the contrast it offers to contemporary technical imaging. In an era in which images circulate as units within larger infrastructures—indexed, captioned, compressed, and geotagged - in order to make them interchangeable, their legibility depends on placeholder mechanisms to standardize what an image can be and where it can be positioned. By contrast, my research and artworks divulge the photographic event before such abstraction occurs. By remaining tied to the condition of emergence, I aim to uncover what is lost when images are detached from situated processes and turned into proxies for places, bodies, or environments.

Nonetheless, this research poses obstacles - most acutely present during documentation. This became obvious in my recent exhibition *The Sympathizer* (2025), developed in collaboration with glaciologists at EPFL's Alpine and Polar Environmental Research Centre (ALPOLE). The exhibition centered on *The Sympathizer*, a strain of *Pseudomonas Fragi* discovered by Dr. Martina Gonzalez Mateu in glacial runoffs from the river Drance de Ferret. At least a third of the 200 bacterial isolates she collected displayed iridescence—a phenomenon not previously observed and visible only under laboratory conditions. As light interacted with the bacteria's microstructures, its surface shifted in color depending on angle. These colors act as a visual imprint, functioning as both a trace of the organism and an interface with its environment, revealing its ongoing adaptation to extreme conditions.



The Sympathizer, 2025
Pseudomonas fragi (bacteria), agar
Glass 60mm diameter× 15mm height



Screenshot of myself and Martina, 2024

Such surfaces—whether bacterial plates or gelatin skins—are tied to the environmental conditions which produce them. Yet the moment they are photographed for circulation or exhibition, they become flattened and sanitized. The documentation functions as a placeholder: a clean, portable image that no longer carries the behavior that defined the original event. This gap mirrors the broader difficulty of imaging ecological crises, where technical images routinely stand in for environmental processes that exceed what a single frame can convey. By foregrounding the friction between a materially situated event and its documentary abstraction, my practice exposes the limitations of photographic placeholders at a time when images are increasingly tasked with representing ecological realities.

I would therefore suggest that placeholder logic is neither neutral nor inevitable. It relies on the suppression of material specificity—on the erasure of chemical and environmental contingencies which shape photographic events. What I hope emerges with my research is a broader suggestion: that photography’s capacity to “make place” lies not in representational fidelity but in the ontological work images perform.