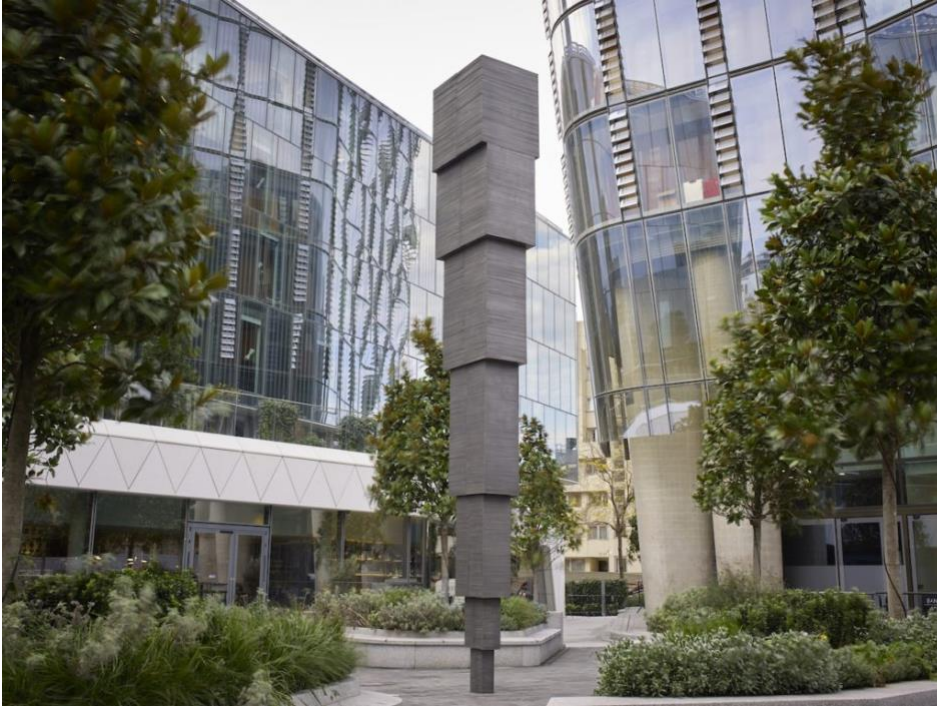


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Warner, Marigold. "Idris Khan's 65,000 photographs." *British Journal of Photography*. November 18, 2019.

Idris Khan's 65,000 photographs



Khan's eight-metre-tall public sculpture in London represents every image the British artist has taken over the past five years: "It is about using the physicality of a photograph to show time"

Every day, more than 1.8 billion photographs are uploaded online. This works out to just over 1.25 million images per minute or 20,000 per second. All of these moments are captured, stored, and shared, yet somehow, we still find a way to forget them. Over the course of the last five years, Idris Khan has taken 65,000 images on his phone, and his latest sculpture, situated in a new development in Southbank, London, is a monument to this.

"It's quite a moving thing to think that this was five years of my life," says Khan, gazing at a scaled mock-up on the desk of the north London studio he shares with his wife, artist Annie Morris. "That time has gone, but this, in some ways, is what's left of it."

Commissioned by the London Borough of Southwark as part of the One Blackfriars Public Art Programme, Khan wanted to create a sculpture that considers our obsession with mass-image-making, and which attempts to capture, if possible, an entire length or period of time in physical form. With the

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rise of digital and social media, the act of holding a tangible photograph has become a rarity, and in a way, Khan's sculpture is also a tribute to that experience. "It's not trying to be critical, but it is a form to represent that."



65,000 Photographs by Idris Khan, 2019 © Stephen White.

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“Cameras have replaced our eyes; we want to photograph everything before we even see it”

– Idris Khan



65,000 Photographs by Idris Khan, 2019 © Stephen White.

“There is this idea that cameras have replaced our eyes; we want to photograph everything before we even see it. We are all guilty of it” says Khan, who is right. The act is all too familiar, in the temptation to Instagram the runny, golden yolk of a perfectly poached egg before we have even tasted or smelt it, or to record our favourite song at a concert rather than stand and soak the reverberations in. “I’m not there to say how many pictures you should take, but in some ways, I think it’s about the ownership we have over certain things. That comes first before the experience”

Looking up at Khan’s sculpture, which stands 8.2 metres tall between the shiny glass windows of new-build developments, the effect of its shape and form is both moving and daunting. The sculpture started as a stack of 65,000 sheets of paper, with its shape — almost like a reverse-pyramid — formed out of the dimensions of standardised photo prints. Khan then pulled and pushed the sheets of paper to create a ridged effect on its sides, before sand-casting and forming it in aluminium.

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“It almost feels like the rings of a tree,” he observes, pointing to its corrugated façade. “I’m not showing the pictures themselves, you’re just seeing the edges of the paper. It is about using the physicality of a photograph to show time.”



© Idris Khan.

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“Photography was a way into being creative. I wasn’t a sculptor or a painter, but when I picked up a camera it felt comfortable”

– Idris Khan



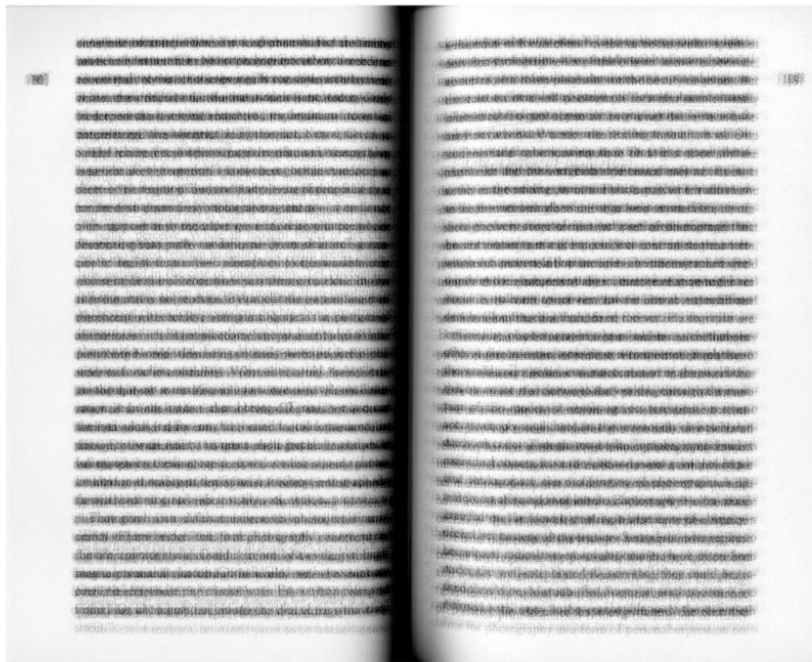
My Mother by Idris Khan, 2019.

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In the process of lamenting his own life, Khan decided to look at that of his mother, who died nine years ago, aged 59. But he could only find 380 photographs from her life, and when he built the sculpture, My Mother stood almost 16 times smaller than 65,000 Photographs, at 53.3cm. The contrast between five years of a life with digital media and a whole lifetime without it is a testament to the evolution of digital media and humanity's use of it to document our existence.

These ideas of time and memory, and the process of layering are present throughout Khan's oeuvre. One of his earliest experiments in 2003 involved superimposing 380 photographs taken during his travels around Europe. Khan proceeded to do the same with every page of Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, Roland Barthe's *Camera Lucida*, and Bernd and Hilla Becher's inventory of industrial structures.

"Photography was a way into being creative," says Khan, who studied for an MA at the Royal College of Art in London in 2004. "I wasn't a sculptor or a painter, but when I picked up a camera it felt comfortable."



every... page of Susan Sontag's Book 'On Photography'; 2004. © Idris Khan

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White Windows by Idris Khan, 2019 © Idris Khan

“It has always been about trying to change the photographic practice into something that looked like painting or drawing,” he continues, referencing one of his more recent series, *White Windows* (2016-2018), where he repeatedly photographed whitewashed storefronts. But where layering in past projects has achieved similar aesthetic results, the outcome in *65,000 Photographs* is entirely different. Rather than compressing the physicality of his subject, the sculpture represents the totality of Khan’s photographed life in a single, abstract, physical structure.

Standing just around the corner from Tate Modern, it is Khan’s first public sculpture in the UK, and he hopes it will trigger passersby to take a moment to reflect on their own time. “Public art is a different kind of engagement to going into a gallery space. It is for the unexpected viewer,” says Khan, who has set up an [Instagram account for the sculpture](#), hoping it will encourage engagement. “It is amazing that we can still make public art in London. Art is a positive act, and I think putting this in the ground is a positive move for London, especially now.”

65,000 Photographs by Idris Khan was originally commissioned by the London Borough of Southwark as part of the One Blackfriars Public Art Programme on behalf of St George City Limited