

The  
Swimming  
Pool *in Photography*

Text by Francis Hodgson





**Frances Benjamin Johnston,**  
ca. 1920s–30s

Girls in a swimming pool at the Mount Vernon Seminary and College, a women's college in Washington, D.C., currently known as the Mount Vernon Campus of the George Washington University.

# Fractured Reflections

*The Multiple Histories of the Swimming Pool*

It is just a tub of water, big enough to get into. But the stories come from everywhere. Out of the fears, one group of strands of history: fear of disease, fear of the industrial working class, fear of water. Out of the joys, another group of strands: the joy of immersion, of swimming itself, of skin and the hope of sex, of sun and health and leisure. Stories out of architecture and social planning; out of wealth itself. The swimming pool has been at different times and places suburban, exotic, utterly private, boisterously public, a threat or a blessing. It is, quite obviously, capable of every kind of symbolism from the crude assertion of financial status to an almost mystical fluidity of meanings that neatly complements the great puddle of chlorinated water that it holds.

There is, for example, a rather wonderful 1968 film by Frank Perry called *The Swimmer*, based on a story by John Cheever and starring Burt Lancaster (Roger Ebert called it his finest performance). In it, Lancaster, as a superficially successful Connecticut suburbanite, swims pool by pool across the backyards of people who have been important in his life, stopping for a conversation with each, until we begin to realize that he suffers from both existential malaise and dissatisfaction with the American Dream. That is not an untypical metaphorical load for pools, although it was also, of course, a plain excuse to parade the hunky actor in his smalls. It is always like that: pools encourage the lowbrow, but allow the highbrow. Fred Astaire's first role was in a movie (*Dancing Lady*, 1933) which, while not quite so heavily reliant on the motif of the pool, nevertheless has a lot of views of Joan Crawford rather languidly seducing Franchot Tone—whom she later married, by the way—in a radically free-form pool. Less metaphor; more of the great star in her swimsuit. Hollywood had whole genres of watery musicals with synchronized swimmers doing duty as the chorus.

Different kinds of history meet in the pool. Those kidney-shaped pools? They quite accurately reflect the change between those who regarded swimming as an almost military exercise, up and down in a regimented way to build strength and health, to those who regarded it as a more flowing, freestyle, playful form of activity. You cannot imagine a transparent plastic armchair with a hollow for your highball glass in a rectangular pool—that just would not be right.

In the summer of 1961, two African-American men, Kwame Leo Lillard and Matthew Walker, Jr., who both knew exactly what they were doing since they were actively training Freedom Riders at the time, went for a

swim in Nashville, Tennessee. The Freedom Rides were the deliberate bus rides taken to Jackson, Mississippi, to challenge the segregation that persisted in the South, by African-Americans and their white supporters relying on *Boynton v. Virginia*, a Supreme Court decision of 1960 that called segregation illegal on interstate transport facilities. The Freedom Riders were physically attacked, and some of the buses were burned. Many of them were sent to jail for “trespass” by unreconstructed white judges, yet still they kept on coming, in protest and to draw attention. Lillard and Walker chose to swim in the whites-only Centennial pool, in Nashville's principal park. “It won't change the water,” Lillard told the attendant, referring to the colour of his skin. Yet within forty-eight hours all the public pools in the city were closed. They stayed closed until 1964—and the Centennial pool never reopened.<sup>1</sup>

All of these histories—and many more—have their historians. The pool is different, or it means very different things, in Australia, Germany, England, and the US. I am sure there is a history of the pool to be written in every culture. There is a fine history (or more accurately a history and gazetteer) of that peculiarly English institution, the lido.<sup>2</sup> The lido is more than an outdoor pool. It is that, but with the specific addition of enormous amounts of room around, to recreate the conditions of a beach. In addition, it suggests to English minds something of the architecture of the liner, or at least of a sophisticated European between-the-wars modernism. There were, amazingly, sixty-eight lidos in use in London at one or another time in the twentieth century. A number of elements contributed to their particular success from the thirties on. A huge bestseller of 1924 was Hans Surén's *Man and Sunlight*, translated into English in 1927. Dedicated to the cult of gymnastic exercise, and specifically to outdoor nudity, the copiously illustrated volume—many of the pictures are of Surén himself, a former chief of the German Army School for Physical Exercise, deeply tanned and very muscular—presumably sold many of its copies to the prurient, the adolescent, or persons who were both of those things. Although close to some rather nasty ideas of eugenics and training-up master races, *Man and Sunlight* seems to have been motivated only by a universal desire to promote healthy living—and it sold as well in Britain as everywhere else.<sup>3</sup> Another such influential driver of the cult of the outdoors, of which in Britain the lido was one manifestation, was Coco Chanel's promotion of suntanning, which before her had been considered plebeian as

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Erin E. Tocknell, “A Cool Dip and a Little Dignity: A History of Nashville's Divided Swimming Pools,” in *The Bitter Southerner*, August 16, 2016, accessed February 2018, <http://bittersoutherner.com/nashville-pools-jim-crow#WpFuN44nill>.

[2]

Janet Smith, *Liquid Assets: The Lidos and Open-Air Swimming Pools of Britain* (London, 2005).

[3]

Ken Worpole, *Here Comes the Sun: Architecture and Public Space in Twentieth-Century European Culture* (London, 2000).





**Henk van der Horst, 1938**

Swimming lessons at the  
Zuiderpark swimming pool in  
The Hague, the Netherlands.



**Loomis Dean, 1954**

The pool at the Beverly Carlton Hotel in Beverly Hills. This hotel was a home to Marilyn Monroe.

The Industrial Revolution poured working populations into British towns, yet public baths and washhouses were not generally available to the poor before 1842. There had been a few baths, usually more of the *hammam* type than the pool we know now. There were, for example, elegant Greek revival baths at Southernhay, Exeter, built in 1821 by John Lethbridge. According to the *Exeter Itinerary* of 1828, they had “cold, hot, plunge, shower, vapor, and medicated baths.” But at two shillings for cold and three for hot, they were far from cheap. Both Liverpool and Birmingham had good facilities early on, but the intervention of public works to supplement the occasional efforts of charitable donors came after the social reformer Edwin Chadwick’s *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain and on the Means of Its Improvement*, which appeared in 1842 and led to a movement for the provision of laundry facilities and bathhouses for the poor. Eventually, the 1848 Public Health Act was passed and from then on the involvement of public authorities was cemented. Private provision had always been different. Institutions like the Young Men’s Christian Association (in the US) or private schools (everywhere) all took up swimming with enthusiasm. Even special interest groups such as the Royal Automobile Association, with its famously lavish pool at its headquarters in Pall Mall, in the very center of London’s “clubland,” took their own attitude to the provision of a welcome luxury to their members.

Every country has a different history. The bathhouse likely held arrangements only to immerse, not to swim. But where bathhouses were built, public pools often followed, and so by the end of the nineteenth century there were many in British cities. Then came the explosion: *Jugendstil* baths, baths like Moorish palaces, Greek revival, brutalist, and plenty that look like spacecraft.

In France, for example, the 1924 Olympics—Johnny Weissmuller competed in the first outdoor fifty-meter pool in France, at Tourelles, in the twentieth arrondissement of Paris—showed the relative paucity of public sports facilities. Yet in 1919 socialist mayors and their administrations had won a ring of industrial municipalities around Paris—often from communist predecessors. *La Ceinture rouge* (“the red belt”) is a phrase that still has resonance in Paris today. The “municipalist” policy of men such as Henri Sellier, mayor of Suresnes between 1919 and 1941, or Charles Auray, mayor of Pantin between 1919 and 1938, derived substantially from patterns in the Netherlands, and included as a central plank of policy the construction of large-scale municipal projects, partly for employment at a time of economic recession on a huge scale, and partly for the future benefits of citizens. Hence the great swimming pool at Pantin, built of brick in 1935 and echoing Dutch modernist models in its every line.<sup>1</sup> Aurey’s son designed it. In France, curiously, it was common at that time to associate pools with other municipal functions. Often, predictably enough, that would be a gymnasium. But at Châtenay-Malabry in the Hauts-de-Seine department, the swimming pool was harnessed to a plant that burned the municipal rubbish, which provided enough power to heat the water. At Pantin, the pool was filled by a deep artesian bore into warmer and less calcium-laden water than was available near the surface.

The same story unfolded again in the sixties, although with the impulse of central government. A succession of state initiatives—including incentives for the planning and design of adjustable pools that could adapt to the weather either by movable roofs or by a sliding panel or wall—was propagated with some success by the French government in the sixties under the title of the “Thousand Pools” campaign.<sup>2</sup> Many of the ensuing pool designs were wonderful; some were built. There are still many examples of the *Tournesol* (“sunflower”), which really does look like a spacecraft, the *Caneton* (“duckling”), and the *Iris* pools, all of which were built in the hundreds at the time.

Barely touched upon in this volume is the history of the construction and maintenance of pools. Nothing worse than a pool which leaks; nothing worse than pool water that goes dirty. It is not just that we have to think of the figure of the “pool boy” raking leaves and clearing filters. There are technical and engineering questions underlying the architecture of every pool—and once each is built, there is a professional sector dedicated to keeping it working. A pool is a machine as well as a building.

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Christelle Inizan, “La piscine de Pantin (1935–1937), une réalisation architecturale et sociale d’envergure,” *Livraisons de l’histoire de l’architecture*, 14:2007, pp. 39–53.

[2]

Élise Nale, “L’État et architecture. Le cas des piscines publiques construites en France (1961–1976),” in Éléonore Marantz (ed.), *L’Atelier de la recherche: Annales d’histoire de l’architecture. Actes de la journée des jeunes chercheurs en histoire de l’architecture du 22 octobre 2015*, Paris, website of the HiCSA, posted online in June 2016, pp. 48–64.



**Diego Opalo, 2012**

The infinity pool of a house  
on a cliff by Fran Silvestre  
Arquitectos in Alicante, Spain.



**René Burri, 1976**

San Cristobal stable, horse pool and house in Mexico City, planned by Luis Barragán and Andrés Casillas in 1967-68.





2014

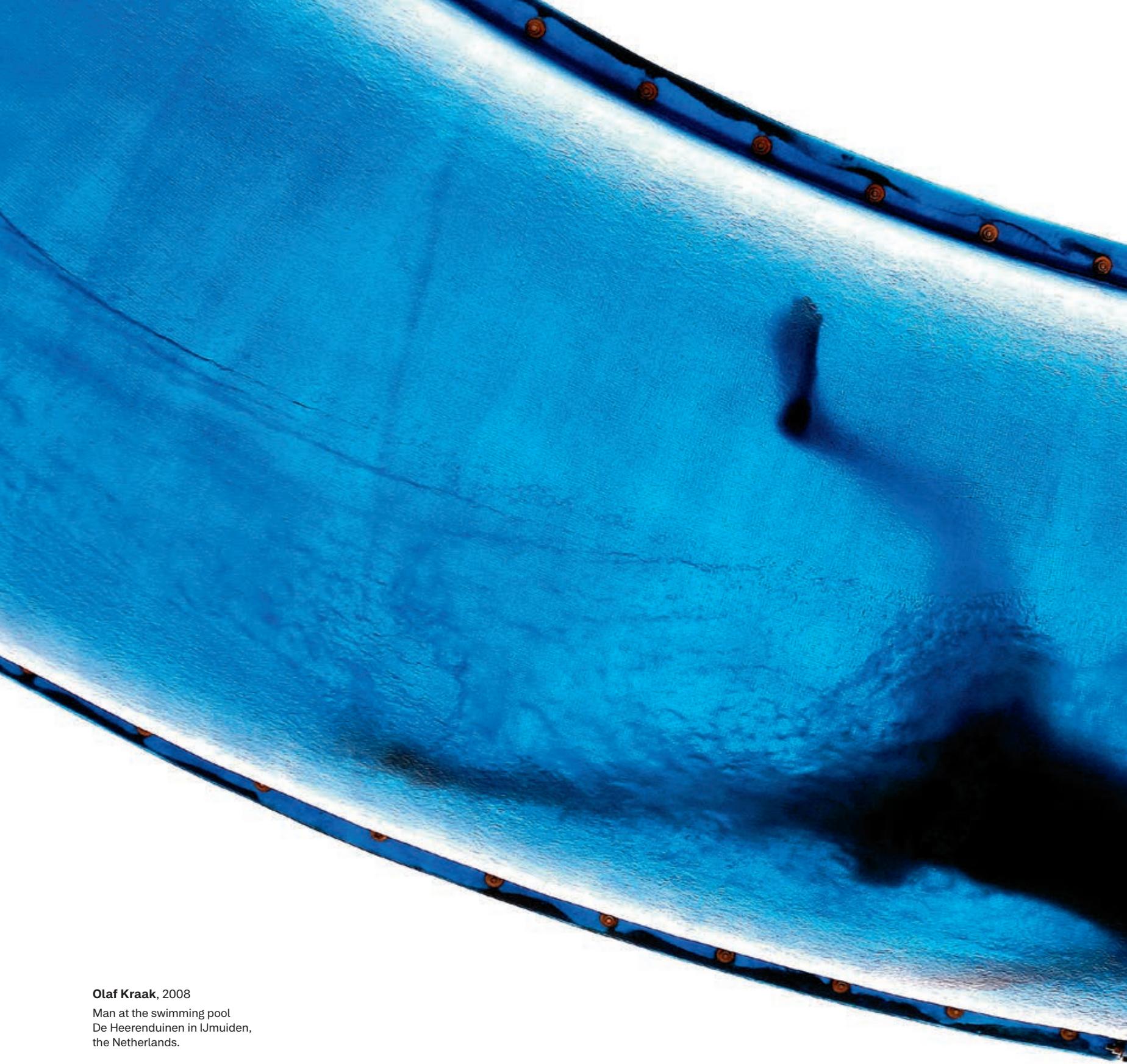
Photo collage of the Liepāja Thermal Bath, Latvia, by Steven Christensen Architecture. This award-winning design was based on formal associations of the dome throughout architectural history and more specifically its role within the typology of the public bath.



**Walter Sanders, 1946**

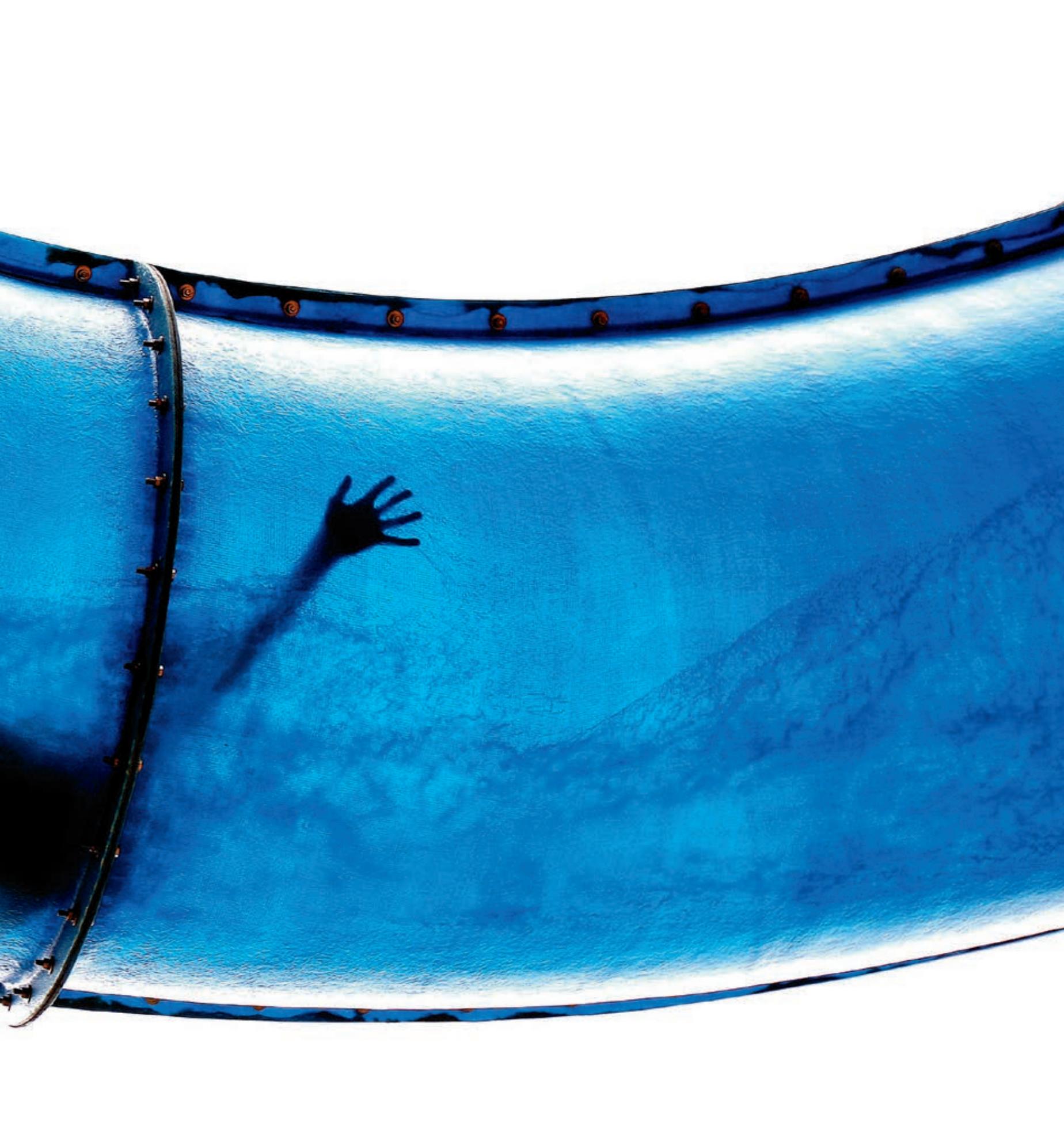
Two men sitting beside a pool  
of water in Sienna, Italy.





**Olaf Kraak, 2008**

Man at the swimming pool  
De Heerenduinen in IJmuiden,  
the Netherlands.



**Marjory Collins, 1942**

The swimming pool of Greenbelt,  
Maryland.







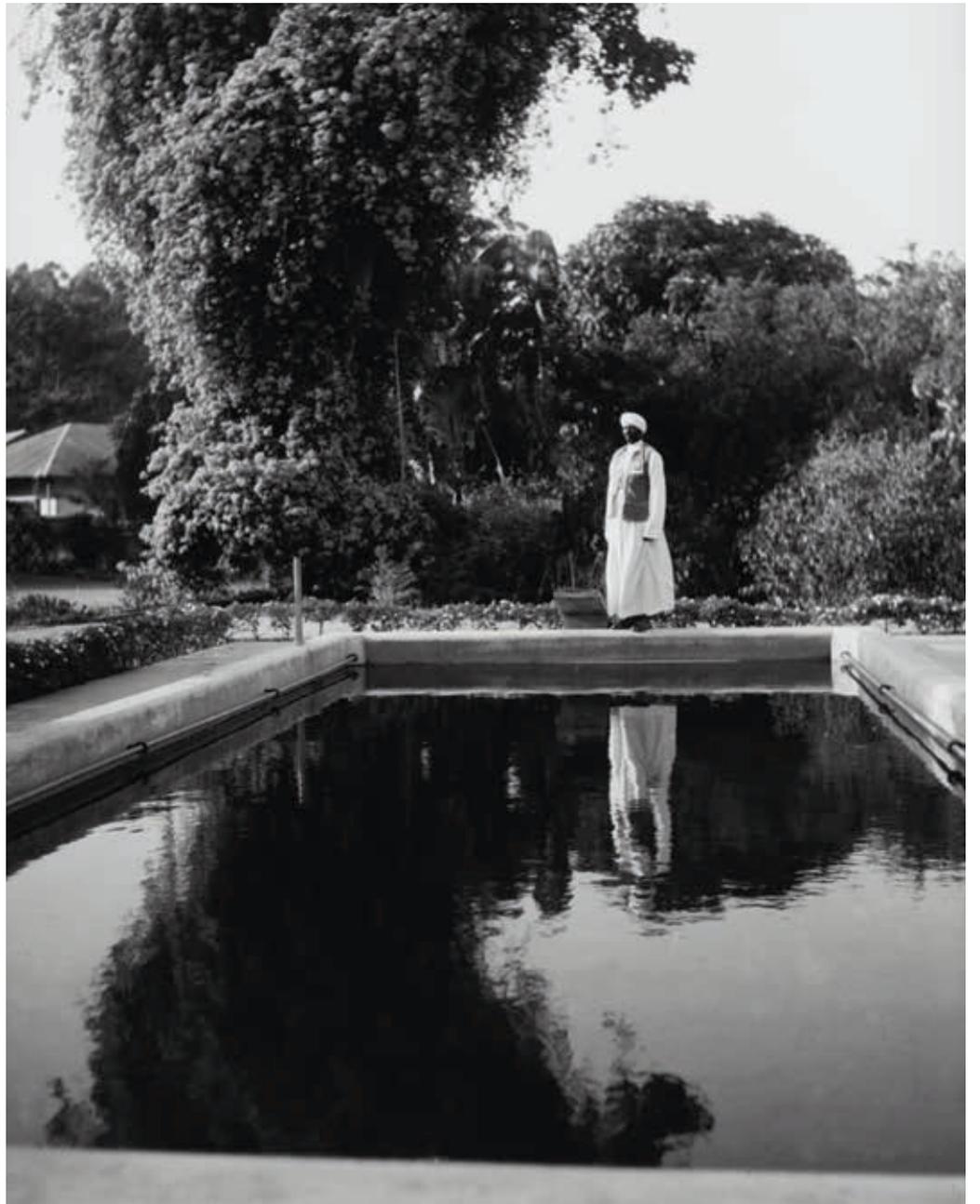
**Martine Franck, 1976**  
Image from the story *Summer Holidays*, taken at a pool designed by Alain Capeilleres in Le Brus, France.



1936

Swimming pool in the midst of  
luxuriant vegetation at the Arusha  
Hotel, Tanganyika, Tanzania.

1936  
Government House from across  
the lawn in Entebbe, Uganda.





**Bob Gomel, 1964**  
The Beatles swimming in Miami.



**Bob Gomel, 1964**  
The Beatles swimming in Miami.

1961

A submerged car which its drunken owner 'parked' in a swimming pool in Beverly Hills, California, believing it to be a parking space. Nobody was injured in the process.









**Yale Joel, 1966**

Underwater evacuation drill with a sunken plane at the Civil Aeromedical Center in Oklahoma City.