



CONFINED TO HOME BY COVID-19, **OLIVER CHANARIN** TURNED HIS LENS TO HIS PARTNER, FIONA JANE BURGESS, EMBARKING ON A PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLABORATION. THE INTIMACY OF THE PORTRAITS THEY CREATED STANDS IN CONTRAST TO THE AUTOMATED INSTALLATION OF WHICH THE WORK IS NOW PART: A MECHANICAL APPARATUS INSPIRED BY THE DISTRIBUTION CENTRES OF GLOBAL ONLINE RETAILERS SUCH AS AMAZON, ECHOING THE ATTENTION-ORIENTATED TECHNOLOGIES OF BIG TECH COMPANIES

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THE BODY & THE MACHINE

In the midst of the first lockdown, the art critic Jörg Heiser published a fierce text on the crisis of cultural production during the pandemic. His article *Artists in Quarantine* concludes that artists should “be prepared to acknowledge uncertainty, to embrace instability... Rather than filling the void with empty rhetoric.” Finally, he wonders if we will see a masterpiece come out of the crisis, “as good things take time”.

From museums and galleries’ empty online viewing rooms to virtual reality art experiences in the form of video games, NFT auctions and frozen Zoom screens during online performances, the past year confronted us with a wide range of digital art encounters. Most of these were more mediocre than satisfying, reminding us of the limitations of art exhibited in the digital sphere. And while some in the art world might claim the net’s subversive potential as the only place left to make and interact with art, others mourned the unique, intimate experience of physically visiting art spaces.

Amid this new landscape, two questions arise: how can artists reflect on the challenges of our digital present without being seduced by the technological possibilities of the medium itself? And what can an inquiry into the photographic medium contribute to this complex question?

The Apparatus (2020), an installation by Oliver Chanarin on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) until 22 August 2021, meditates on these queries and appears as one of the rare, strong artistic outcomes of the pandemic. The photographic work manages to reflect upon the unsettling void of social distancing in a sophisticated albeit explicit way.

It also finds in the chosen format and medium, the perfect expression for the challenges of our time: the struggle of being locked in at home, confronted with our inner demons while being exposed to the digital machine 24/7.

A physical collaboration

Before the advent of Covid-19, Chanarin planned to travel across the UK and undertake a photographic survey inspired by the late August Sander’s famous *Citizens of the Twentieth Century*. (The monumental photographic project was Sander’s attempt to create a collective portrait of German society, categorised by profession or social class, which stretched from the years of the Kaisers through to the early Federal Republic.) The pandemic, however, disrupted Chanarin’s initial plan and saw the photographer confined to his London apartment with his family, where he decided instead to photograph his wife, Fiona Jane Burgess, herself an established artist and film director. Nonetheless, one of the images from Sander’s series – *Painter’s Wife* (c1926) – served as a starting point for Chanarin and Burgess’ photographic encounter. The photograph depicts Helene Abelen, the wife of painter Peter Abelen, an androgynous beauty who gazes self-confidently into the camera with a cigarette gripped between her lips.

Created in-between childcare and household duties, Chanarin and Burgess’ collaboration captures the emotional ups and downs they experienced during the confinement; a “cathartic” visual diary, as Burgess describes it. The couple decided to take pictures at different moments of the day: after sunrise before their

sons woke up, later in the afternoon, and at night. Instead of portraying typical scenes of everyday domestic life, the camera concentrates on Burgess’ face and body. We see her half-dressed and naked under shifting light, performing various postures and personas before a neutral background. Always in dialogue with the camera lens, she turns the process of being photographed into a playful encounter: a visual back-and-forth that embraces the manifold facets of her personality – from fragile to strong, innocent to kinky, contemplative to provocative, depressed to euphoric. Instead of being a passive ‘muse’, the bearer of the look, Burgess becomes the motor and dominator of the scenes. She describes the process as an “empowering experience”, one that enabled her to be much more than “the wife” or “the mother”. Her deliberately equivocal role play is reminiscent of the rebellious self-portraits by Claude Cahun or Cindy Sherman, who question the visual and cultural codes of gender, identity and photography.

Several of the photographs present fragmented views of Burgess’ body, depicting it as a landscape with a personal history. One of the most intimate images shows her torso with a scar on the stomach, the result of post-childbirth surgery, which becomes a symbol of vulnerability and strength. The photographs subvert what film scholar Laura Mulvey defines as an objectifying “masculine gaze” through their careful observation and long-term engagement. They represent collaborative portraits created out of a dialogue with the subject in front of the camera, aiming to redefine what co-authorship can look like. Indeed, the collaboration represents a highly

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 - 6 Installation shot of *The Apparatus*, part of the exhibition *Off the Wall* at SFMoMA.
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intimate documentation of human experience that challenges the boundaries of the photographic genre and its power relations in the digital age.

This careful approach recalls the work of Sander's contemporary Helmar Lerski and his project *Metamorphosis Through Light* (1935-36), in which the photographer employed 16 mirrors and filters to direct sunlight onto his model, creating a series of 140 different faces from one profile. Chanarin and Burgess' project also echoes Alfred Stieglitz's portraits of painter Georgia O'Keeffe. During their 30-year relationship, Stieglitz made more than 300 portraits of his wife – naked and dressed, posing in front of her paintings, showing her entire body as well as isolated views of her neck, breasts and hands. In a later statement O'Keeffe wrote that Stieglitz's "idea of a portrait was not just one picture", instead it was a composite of pictures searching for an idea and personality too large to fit in a single photograph.

The monitoring machine

In contrast to the intimacy of Chanarin's portraits, which he printed by hand in an analogue darkroom in a conventional 8x10inch format, the automated distribution centres of global online retailers like Amazon (one of the

few big 'winners' of the pandemic) inspired the display of the photographs at SFMoMA. A mechanical apparatus with robotic arms, designed and built in collaboration with Fabian Nitschkowski and Paul Geisler, who make up the Hamburg-based collective Neue Farben, hangs and rehanges the framed pictures at eye level along wall-mounted rails inside the gallery.

The images are initially placed randomly. The apparatus then monitors how long visitors spend looking at specific works through an AI-connected surveillance camera installed in a corner of the space, which identifies each photograph via a unique digital 10-number sequence. It employs the results to curate the room depending on which images appear most popular, based on the length of time viewers spend with them. In this way, it follows the "consumer-oriented" policies of big tech companies that store, analyse and use the data we provide for their purposes. The new attention-oriented technologies confront us with forms of marketing and surveillance that operate subtly. As Professor Shoshana Zuboff claims in her landmark publication *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, the personal data taken from users enables tech companies to create profiles to target and potentially manipulate or control them. The work also references the fact that as machines' capabilities increase, more and more professions are under threat, with artificial intelligence replacing physical labour. Indeed, the installation provoked fear among SFMoMA's team of art handlers about becoming outmoded themselves.

The Covid-19 pandemic has alerted us to the relationship between state power, digital exposure and our bodies. Significantly, *The Apparatus* presents two different photographic strategies that address and simultaneously subvert the new paradigm of the digital age: the collaborative portrait based on complex, often fragile human encounters, and the non-collaborative algorithmic image display controlled by machines. The juxtaposition underlines the enduring strength of portraiture as collaborative depiction while boldly revealing the problematic shift in market-oriented photographic technologies: a strong portrait can only be an approximation of a person, never providing a universally valid likeness. And it must develop out of the tension, trust and cooperation between the subjects in front of and behind the camera. **BJP**

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Further viewing

The Apparatus is on show as part of the exhibition *Off the Wall* at SFMoMA until 22 August 2021. sfmoma.org



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8

