

# **Queer Lockdown and the Reflective Mask: Towards a Reading of *PANDEMANIAC***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper uses psychoanalysis and materialism to site PANDEMANIAC within its framework of production, and consider its relationship to the genres of lockdown photography and luxury goods advertising. It sketches out how stubborn binaries within the photographic discourse are disrupted via strategies including alienation and the use of mask, in order to explore a visual language around mental health which is authentic without being neo-realistic. A triangular relationship between the situational, personal, and universal allows themes to move through and beyond the domestic lockdown narrative. Tentative readings of photographs consider some of the things in play in the series, including the queering of tropes and the troubling of object-subject relations.*

### **PANDEMANIAC**

I've been invited to talk about my series PANDEMANIAC. It was made over a period of two months last year during the first lockdown. There are 24 photographs in the series. I appear in each of them. All of the photos were made in my flat, using a camera on a tripod with a timer or shutter release. Most of the images make reference to common motifs of the Covid-19 pandemic. All of the images are square. The colours used are red, black, and gold.

These things I can say for certain. From here on in, I'm on less solid ground.

### **SELF-CRITIQUE**

Being an artist asked to write a paper on your own work is like being a thief asked to rob your own house. It feels wrong, but you accept the job because you think it'll be straightforward. After all you have the keys, you installed the alarm, and you know where the jewels are hidden. Once inside, however, things don't go as planned. The layout of the house isn't how you remember it; things that you always thought were precious now appear worthless; and the walls are scrawled with admonishments: VANITY; POST-RATIONALISATION; SELF-DELUSION.

### **DREAMWORK**

If this sounds at all like a dream, it's because it is: I dreamt a less coherent version of the same scenario soon after I was invited to give this paper. Freud argued that our fears and desires are manifest to us in dreams, distorted and disguised: they must be decoded in order to yield up their latent meaning.

The psychoanalytical tools involved in this process have long been applied not only to people but also to texts. While Freud was referring to the literary text when he described it as a "symptom of the artist", the definition of text has since been expanded to mean any coherent sign set that can be read. This includes photography.

I'd like to draw on psychoanalysis, along with cultural materialism, to sketch out a tentative reading of PANDEMANIAC. I'll start by placing the series within the productive process, before outlining some of the theoretical, thematic, and aesthetic interests at play.

### **PRODUCTION MOTIVATIONS**

Since functional intent is pertinent to meaning, I want to explain my motivations for making the series. The first was financial. I started these photos as part of an application for a paid commission to make a lockdown project. When I didn't get it, I carried on nonetheless.

My second motivation was therapeutic. I was greiving for the death of a loved one. Additionally, I have a history of mental illness. Neuroscience has shown how making art helps with the healthy regulation of affect, which is at the core of mood disorders such as depression and anxiety.

My third motivation was diaristic. I had time on my hands. Following Sontag's description of photography as "A way of certifying experience", I wanted to reflect on my novel and often difficult experience of being without work, separated from my partner, and alone in my flat, and grieving. I began to wonder what a visual rendering of mental health struggles might look like.

My last motivation was reactionary. I wanted to offer a counterpoint to the sub-genre of lockdown photography which quickly emerged last year, and which centred around a homogenous, heteronormative and naïve style of neo-realism. Several large-scale projects invited the public to submit photos as a way of 'documenting' our 'national experience' of the Covid-19 crisis. One of these was Hold Still.

### **NEO-REALISM AND THE PANDEMIC**

Comprising a selection of a hundred photographs, each accompanied by a caption like "Everyday Hero" or "PPE Volunteer", Hold Still is so aggressively mythologizing that it feels like it's been curated by an AI bot tasked with striking a tonal balance between propaganda and satire.

As you can perhaps tell the project, and others like it, pushed my buttons. The urgency of my need to provide an antidote was, in psychoanalytic terms, a strong defence mechanism.

Hold Still is a collaboration between the National Portrait Gallery, Kate Duchess of Cambridge, and the international law firm Taylor Wessing. How these various interests - art-institutional, royal, and corporate – align to create what they describe as "A Portrait of Our Nation in 2020" is a fascinatingly visible example of Foucault's "regime of truth", in which the production and distribution of 'truth' are inextricably bound up in circular relations to systems of power.

Central to this regime is the notion of 'realism'. Allied to modes of naturalism, reportage, vernacular and documentary, realism can travel through the procedures of power-centred regulation with little scrutiny, because it is more likely to be assumed to be 'true.'

I would argue, however, that realism in photography is an artificial and historically-contingent construction; it has an unstable or duplicitous relationship with 'the truth'; and, moreover, it is often a poor way to get at 'truths'.

### **ALIENATION AND MAKING-STRANGE**

A hundred years ago Bertolt Brecht pioneered Epic Theatre, using effects of artificiality and estrangement as a way of precipitating in his audience an intellectual clarity about the politics in play. At around the same time, he criticised photography's obsession with realism, arguing that "a simple 'reproduction of reality' is now less than ever able to say anything about reality."

In PANDEMANIAC, I draw on Brechtian and Formalist ideas of alienation and "making-strange". These ideas have much in common with themes explored in psychoanalytic thinking, including defence mechanisms and the components of dreams. I felt that if I was going to be making work which related to depression, anxiety, and disordered eating, I needed to allow the viewer to look at the images without feeling that she was required to empathise emotionally. Work made by an artist about their own "suffering" is frequently received as coercive and gauche, and has a repellent effect.

### **THE HALF-MASK**

The distancing mask – or half-mask, as I've come to think of it – employed in my series is both literal and figurative. Sometimes it is a physical mask – visor, headdress, scarf, wig, make-up. At other times the effect is achieved formally through blurring, reflection, obscuring, cropping off the face. The halfmask operates on multiple levels. It grants me as the maker a second, thicker skin behind which I can more safely 'act out' trauma. It can directly and figuratively relate to Covid. It can be used expressionistically to say something about the external or internal world. And it enables the viewer to engage with the images, and the ideas therein, without feeling compelled to sympathise with an individual's specific, excessively personal narrative.

## **EXPRESSION VS DOCUMENT, ETC**

I'm aware that these intentions are not always successful. In particular, there can be a suspicion that the images are not 'authentic' in their representation of my mental health struggles. One curator at a leading gallery, to whom I recently showed the work, liked the photos of makeup smeared on a visor, and dough shaped into a baby. This was because firstly, she felt these were the sorts of things an unhinged person might realistically do in lockdown; and secondly, because I had portrayed them simply. But she told me that most of the other images were too contrived and constructed, too "artistic", to be credible.

This points to an interesting expectation about what mental disorder looks like (or how it should be 'performed' for the camera), and returns us to the fallacious relationship between neo-realism and truth. The fallacy has its roots in 19th century writings on photography as an unmediated agent of nature, and it persists to this day. It informs the binaries which we often accept uncritically, especially that of documentary photography versus art photography. Allan Sekula further expands thus: "photographer as seer versus photographer as witness, photography as expression versus photography as reportage, theories of imagination (and inner truth) versus theories of empirical truth".

In PANDEMANIAC I aim to queer, or trouble these category binaries. I've already touched on how I use alienation and the mask towards this end. I'd now like to consider some of the other strategies I explore, and where they can be seen. I must point out that I've had various degrees of cognizance about the things I'm discussing. Some were explicit intentions from the outset. Others developed through the process of making the work. And a few are things I'm noticing consciously only now.

## **FASHION/LUXURY/GLAMOUR**

Unlike neo-realism, which privileges the 'natural' and strives to make the agency of photographer and photograph as illegible as possible, fashion and luxury goods advertising is explicitly fake. Its language is one of excess, polish, hyper-beauty, and artifice. PANDEMANIAC draws on this language, but always falls short of its standards of perfection. We see a person trying to conjure up, in the confines of their flat, a glamorous world, but always sliding towards the tawdry, comical, pathetic. The promises of fashion and luxury goods advertising - paragons of commodity fetishism under late stage capitalism - are rendered absurd in the face of the pandemic. The desires which drive them - the need for affiliation, status, completeness - are impotent under social isolation. Desire leaves us only with its corollary - anxiety. For example: this image draws on the visual rhetoric of makeup advertising. But here the lipstick is smudged, the nails are chipped, the skin is sweaty and blemished. The payoff inherent in the product genre - sexual desirability - cannot be fulfilled. Instead the figure of the lover is replaced by the laser thermometer, which is literally kissing the protagonist's lips. The pattern created by the laser is reminiscent of a viral form: a kiss of death, potentially.

## **DEATH DRIVE**

The allusions to mortality which pervade the series, while at times touching on Covid, extend beyond it to a broader consideration of the death drive. In some places the allusions are explicit - a shroud; a dissected mouse; a skull; dead hornets; ash; rotting fruit. In one image, the protagonist reaches to touch hands with a puppet figure through a plastic sheet, like in many news photos we've seen this last year. But here the figure recalls the allegorical Death of medieval art, come beckoning. Elsewhere in the series the allusions to mortality come via unproductive sexuality. In this image the red ball again suggests a Covid viral particle; but in form and placement it also signifies a human egg. Crochet and tomatoes echo menses. A baby is fashioned out of bread dough. Sanitiser looks like sexual fluids on a fetishized shoe. But in all this, the context and the body are clearly queer and childless. This speaks to a radical politics opposed to what Lee Edelman terms "reproductive futurism", where the child becomes the site of psychic and material hope and redemption. The queer is positioned directly against this, embodying as she does a "relentlessly narcissistic, antisocial, and future-negating drive."

I made PANDEMANIAC while grieving for the death of a loved one. It is too soon for me to talk too much about that now. But the missing dog in the series was a way for me to consider loss.

## **QUEERING TROPES**

I've touched on how, in the series, I appropriate and reconfigure common tropes of the pandemic, such as stockpiling, facemasks, visors, temperature-taking, vinyl gloves, self-isolating, loo roll, and having a lockdown birthday. Queering these tropes functions as a playful defence mechanism, helping to denature them and disinvest them of their triggering threat. At the same time the queering draws attention to the semantic properties of the tropes and motifs, inviting us to expand their possibilities of meaning within both a non-normative individualistic frame of reference, and then through and beyond that to the abstract.

There is thus a triangular relationship between the situational, the personal, and the universal. Here, for example, we see two PPE masks hanging on a coat-stand. The situational link with the pandemic is obvious. Regarding the personal narrative, we note that they have been hand embroidered with beads, suggesting that the protagonist has an affinity with kitsch/glamour, and that they have spent considerable time embellishing disposable things. This investment of labour to apparently petty ends is a theme seen elsewhere in the series, and speaks to the protestant work ethic which, denied its locus of capitalist productivity, must needs be redirected. One of the masks says MASK THE FUCK UP, indicating a performative, anxious public aggression. Also hanging is a dog lead and collar; in reflection, we see a ceramic German shepherd. Read intertextually across the series, where we see other iterations of the same leitmotif, we infer that the protagonist no longer has their real-life dog. Universally, therefore, we are led to consider absence, loneliness, grief. The protagonist is weakly reflected in the mirror, as if their life force isn't strong enough to fully inhabit the scene. They are incapable of returning their own gaze, let alone that of the viewing subject. The composition of the picture is suggestive of a Rorschach inkblot test, both implying that the scene and/or the person are under psychological scrutiny, and denying the viewer access to an instantaneous, comprehensive read.

## **TEXT-OBJECT AND VIEWING SUBJECT**

Looking at a standard photograph, we see space rendered into two dimensions according to the laws of vanishing point perspective, bound by a frame, and caught in time. The viewer occupies the point of view of the camera. The signifying system of photography thus simultaneously involves the scene depicted, and the gaze of the spectator. It contains the object-text, and the viewing subject. In a wellmade neo-realist photo, the subject is under the illusion that she is witnessing the world from a unique point of view, which she shares with the photographer.

In PANDEMANIAC, I am always part of the text-object. The conventional dynamic whereby the viewer occupies the space vacated by the photographer is disrupted. There is a double displacement – the viewer substitutes the photographer, and the photographer substitutes the object. Additionally, almost always as this object I am cropped, blurred, masked, or reflected, denying the viewer full and coherent access. In one of the final images in the series, the visual ambiguity between foreground, protagonist, and reflected camera, threatens to destabilise our sense of perspective to such a degree that the visual logic of what are we looking at, and from where, breaks down. For me, these various strategies act as metaphors for mental health crises, when I have experienced a profound sense of disassociation and dislocation from my physical body.

## **NOTEBOOK FRAGMENTS**

I'll have to stop soon because I'm running out of time. Yet I feel a creeping anxiety that I've talked about the wrong things, and missed the right things out. So by way of a final outpouring I'd like to share some lines lifted directly from my notebook.

Reflections. Mirrors. Denying/averting the direct gaze.

Shininess. As it relates to ideas of hygiene; glamour; wealth; cheapness; kitsch; camp.

Crafting, making, baking, as gendered acts. Magic, spell-casting, as queer acts. Shamanism and links to third genders. Motifs of red chillies/cornetto rosso good luck charms/ red finger nails.

Food. Disordered eating. Chain smoking. Drinking.

Temporal sequencing. A movement from figurative to abstract. From playful to sombre. From solid to liquid.

Fetishism. Clichés of femininity. Joan Riviere and womanliness as Masquerade.

Absence. The partial absence of the protagonist. The traces of the absent dog. The absence of titles/captions.

Voyeurism and exhibitionism. Narcissism. The narcissistic investment in surface akin to the art-photographic surface. Active and passive viewing positions coded as masculine and feminine.

In their phrasal nature these notes are like dreams, which Freud described as “brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of the dream-thoughts.” The acts of condensation, displacement and symbolism at work in dreams need to be unravelled, expanded and crossreferenced to get at their meaning. I feel that so too must these fragments of ideas about what my series is about and what it is made of. And, like the dreamwork, the images in the series must be read as a whole, intertextually, because individually they cannot make full sense. This creates problems with how the work can be successfully circulated within the image economy, when curators and publishers often want a very small edit, and digital networked culture expects a single, quickly-legible money shot.

I’d like to end by saying that what I’ve outlined in this paper is by no means a definitive analysis or reading of the series. In my work I aim to create a charged space, without unary meaning, to which the viewer must bring her own questions and interpretations, which will never be the same as mine.

Nor did I go into the series having consciously articulated all of the theoretical interests I’ve discussed. To return to the analogy with which I started, making a series feels like walking through a strange house: in some places there is a well-lit straight corridor, in others you’re stumbling around in the dark unsure of the way. It’s only when you’re out of the house that you can look back and try to piece together the journey that took you from room to room.

I say try, because I’m very aware of my failures. I’m reminded of a quote by Walter Benjamin, with which I’d like to leave you. “The illiterate of the future’, it has been said, ‘will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph.’ But must we not also count as illiterate the photographer who cannot read his own pictures?”