

Government imposed isolation, we are separated, metamorphosed. Influenced to interact antithetically. Sociality morphed into an unnaturally virtual affair.

We are ever more connected. Instruments of connectivity adorn us, we feel naked, lost without them. We reside in the web, everything interconnected, yet groups, bubbles of belief running at parallels to each other, never coinciding. The oxymoronic connection and isolation create an ethereal tension.

The virtual becomes the only tether we have to the world outside ourselves, yet when we enter the virtual it is curated, algorithmically, so we see simple echoes, reproductions of our own tastes. We have become like Narcissus; staring into the pool, infatuated by our observations, ignorant to the fact that it is only ourselves, reflected. A pool of information from which we cannot avert our eyes.

The algorithmic dance of segregation infects every inch of our being. We are trapped within our social bubbles, a loop of the same people, same views, same conversations. Comfortable repetition, the continuous tormenting mundanity. An implication of ever-present uncertainty.

"We are trapped in technology because we are so unbelievably impressed by technology ... Technology is not the problem, our approach to technology is the problem."

Marina Abramovic, (2015)

Inescapable connection
Unbridgeable remoteness.

Bubbles; flimsy by nature , they pop and join . Bubbles are not supportive or constraining. You play in the bubbles, bubbles are fun, bubbles are for children's birthday parties and relaxing baths. Not entrapments, snaring people into pacts of mutually assured destruction. Physical bubbles (in the sense of the crystalline, effervescent orbs that glisten as the wind sweeps them away) are fluid, palpable; Created in a breath, and destroyed with a sudden gesture. Law enforced 'bubbles' are harder to destroy, create, imagine. Intangible bonds, families and friends now palpable. Unspoken priority ranking now exposed.

Apocryphal, simulated interactions leave us wanting, aching for the hug at the end of a conversation, implications of almost imperceptible gestures, the accustomed clasp of familiar fingers.

I talk to you in an empty room,

*Always connected,
never touching.*

Safe in segregation.

*But when I switch you off
I am alone,
drunk and horny.*

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Social media and video chats generate performative reproductions. There is an acute awareness of people watching; the audience. We observe. Eyes constantly tracing, magnetically drawn to our own faces, examining ourselves whilst we talk. The expressions we are unaware of, how we look when we are engrossed in conversation; bored, raw in absence of the rehearsed 'mirror expression'. This awareness curates our actions; measured, considered, we wait to talk, communicating through tapping fingers. We construct an impersonated self, who we want to portray, via the 'Spectacle' performance of our former lives, 'normality'. These performative virtual enactments of normalcy only heighten the feeling of abnormal separation. Screens, insignificant boxes, displaying the isolation of each attendant.

The uncomfortable cognitive dissonance of simultaneous connection yet unequivocal isolation creates an internal imbalance. A palpable stress in the air. Unable to touch, we search desperately for human contact, with each virtual interaction we are almost satisfied but never wholly fulfilled.

Chloe Wise examines the construction of self, consumption, sensuality, and image making. In her performance 'It's the least the world can do' 2020 (created during lockdown) she sits in profile wearing silk pajamas, holding an iPad screen within the audience's view, 'facetimeing' herself. During the video she maintains a dialogue with herself using fragmented snippets of overheard conversation. The work has a deranged air to it, reminiscent of films depicting mentally ill patients talking to walls. The clearly composed dialogue is a conspicuous comment on the formulated way in which we present ourselves online.

"Isolated inhabitants (generally isolated in the framework of the family cell) see their lives reduced to the pure triviality of the repetitive combined with the obligatory absorption of an equally repetitive special."

Guy Debord - 1961

Amalia Ulman often uses social media within her work to explore the themes of class, sexuality, and gender. Her durational performance 'Excellences & Perfections' (2014) was displayed through her Instagram account over the course of four months. During the project she created a fabricated self-identity, and a contrived narrative, of a woman breaking down. This was projected to her followers and accepted as authentic. This piece analyses how we construct preferred identities and frame ourselves through the lens of personal cameras and media platforms. Ulman uses the apex of Debord's 'Spectacle' to evaluate its repercussions.

Internal and external conflicts create tension. (Horrified by the accidental brushing of a stranger's hand.) This venereal tension is creative gold; emotional, physical, sexual frustration exacerbated in the ambiance of fear and seclusion, interplaying with the rules of confinement. Binding authoritarian restrictions imposed for our protection govern every aspect of our intimate social interactions. We rely on the rules, to keep us safe. Yet there is no safe word, no gesture to indicate we have hit our limit. So we sit, hog tied by duty and obligation; we submit.

Regulations have created distinct taboos; touching, coughing, hugging, kissing, spitting, fornicating. Saliva, urine, sweat, vomit and semen, are inherently uncomfortable; we determine these natural occurrences as disgusting. An ingrained recoiling, stomach churning, muscle clenching repulsion. Amidst current awareness of germs, disease, such taboos have become even more confining.

It is human nature to break the rules; their forbidden nature creates an alluring appeal.

"You could not have pure love or pure lust nowadays. No emotion was pure because everything was mixed up with fear"

George Orwell. (1948)

Smith/Stewart play with themes of intimacy, power, control, taboos and BDSM. They typically present their work in an intensely visceral way. In 'Intercourse' 1993 a large video installation of one mouth spitting into another, is projected with amplified sound across two walls. This act confronts the viewer, which is at such contradiction to the general, palatable sensitivities, resulting in reactions of revulsion and intrigue. This piece, as with much of their work, is intentionally uncomfortable; as they push their own limits, exploring intimacy, dependency and power, they also push the viewer to the limits of their own endurance in experiencing such intimate, intense and disconcerting scenes.

"Taboos are mainly expressed in prohibitions... there is no need to prohibit something that no one desires to do, and a thing that is forbidden with the greatest emphasis must be a thing that is desired." – 'Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence'

Sigmund Freud (1912)

Sexuality, fantasy, impulse, urge, desire; inherently taboo. Our most innate instinct, shrouded in shameful silence. The messiness of the act, the sweat, cum: dripping, the gushing stench of sex, abhorrent to the sensitivities of mainstream society.

Individually resolving the counterplay we battle our instincts; restrictions, leave us gagging, choking for power, vulnerability, intimacy. The overwhelming nature of our isolation creates strain, an intensity, drowning us with anxious cravings that cannot currently be satisfied.

*I want to spit.
I want to spit on everything I see.
Dirty it.
Spread myself upon it.*

*The taboo makes my mouth water.
Swelling with saliva.
It longs to flow from me.
I want to leave my tainted drool upon your face.*

"Sexuality is a driving force of people's lives; it is beset with powerful taboos that shape human behaviour and communication."
Crespo-Fernandez (2018)

An assault on our bodies, through uncontrollable fluids, which flow from us and into us without consent. The entities of which we assume dominion is a direct act of violation. A gut-wrenching revulsion so tangible, you taste its bitter flavour on your tongue. Trickle down your spine, the captivating urge to escape.

A virtual reality has set upon us. Boredom, sexual frustration and anxiety overshadowing our lives. Just as we perform echoes, we seek displays of the connection we crave. Escapism from the dissatisfaction and unfulfilling nature of our interactions. Hedonistic pleasures, fending off the mosquito-like hum of anxiety, momentarily satisfying emersion, briefly elevating strain from the metaphorical straitjacket. The repetition of days unchanged, the confusion of connected distance, only a few things allow you to be jolted from the haze; discomfort and arousal.

We are all voyeurs within the ever present, all consuming, artificial depths. We watch a world performance through a black mirror. Virus', disease, contamination, dirt is disgusting, repulsive, unsightly. As with sexual kinks, they are pushed from the public eye, residing on the fringes of social conscious. The revolting actuality of illness and death hidden like a dirty secret. By deliberately making people uncomfortable, exploring tension, to allow them to examine their own reactions, to be within their discomfort; to embrace it.

*Virus' are sexual.
They live inside of you, multiplying, spreading
throughout your innards.
Permeating our moisture, our mouths, our orifices.
Anywhere they can get inside.
They long to be in you,
to insert their genetic material,
taking over your cells.*

Cheryl Donegan explores sexuality, pornography, and voyeurism within her video head. The visuals are of a simple pink background with a vibrant green bottle. Donegan, wearing a sports bra, approaches the bottle and unplugs an opening on its side, white liquid spouts out and she catches it within her mouth, then repeatedly spits the liquid back into the bottle to the soundtrack of 'A Good Idea' by Sugar. She lets the liquid dribble from her mouth, laps it from the table and uses her tongue to caress the bottle. Her actions are hyper-sexualized, reminiscent of oral sex within porn. Watching the work there is a sense of uncomfortable intimacy, it is captivating in its autoeroticism. As a viewer you are forced into the perspective of voyeur, feeling as though you are witnessing something private, or doing something wrong by watching. This feeling creates a captivating tension. The inability to look away from such a sexual performance makes you feel dirty, slightly perverted. Furthermore, the way she performs, reusing the same fluid by spitting it back into the bottle, is taboo. Backwashed and tainted with her saliva she laps up the milk, demonstrating the messiness of the sexual act. The way she performs recreates pornographic scenes, but the lack of eye contact or acknowledgement of the camera, or the fact of recording is significant, creating an additional barrier between the viewer and herself. This adds to the impression of intrusion.

"Art has to be disturbing, art has to ask a question, art has to predict the future."

Marina Abramovic. *'Walk through Walls'* (2016)