

## Pandemic: a six-handed study

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### ABSTRACT

The present six-handed study is a journey into some of our pandemic emotions through photography. It is the result of a collective investigation and some improvisation in a Lisbon interior. The subject of this collective research is the impact of the pandemic on affects and the body. Body and affects are seen here as concepts and emotions deeply affected by the social and planetary transformations generated by the long-lasting and deadly acceleration of something called neoliberal capitalism, of which the ongoing pandemic is only one of the latest outcomes, together with the uncertainties and further vulnerabilities generated by the omen of a recurrent viral catastrophe. This is the frame within which the three authors of the study gave shape to their investigation, being among those who live in Europe as fully-fledged citizens and having relatively benefited till now from the distance the Global North has established from social and environmental disasters 'out there'. The voice that accompanies the present photographic story is situated, individual, and collective at the same time: it represents a viewpoint, an emotional tangle that reflects the lonely experience of one of us who is also and immediately in relationship with the others, and in the absence of the Other. This point of view is provided here in a circular time lapse, as the pandemic overflows the boundaries between past, present, and future, it brings memory in the realm of dreams and filters emotions through fears of the End and loneliness.

### Keywords

pandemic, body, affects, silence, absence, fear of the end

### Introduction

A journey into pandemic emotions through photography. Fears, desires, presences, and absences are at the centre of this six-handed study, born out of reflections and improvisations in a Lisbon interior. It came to life from the necessity to explore the present time, suspended and solid, and to imagine future time, absent and unpredictable, starting from a dialogue between bodies, affects, and silences. Body and affects refer to concepts and emotions that have been profoundly deconstructed by the current pandemic, which we consider to be the result of the acceleration of neoliberalism which is the context that allowed for the creation of biopolitical devices that further transform, probably in a definitive manner, perceptions of the

body as well as forms of affective organization between those who, by living in the Global North and being citizens with full rights, had benefitted up until this time, albeit in varying capacities, from a sort of distance from social and environmental disasters, a distance that the so-called North of the world seems to enjoy. Control, containment, isolation, atomization, and at the same time the valuing of affects and care work through cultural, social, and patriarchal economical devices (Busi 2020), the deconstruction of the modern relation between work and lifetime by the precariousness and active ideology of competition are all results, at the social, cultural, and economic level, of the intersection of all neoliberal politics (Giuliani, Martucci, and Galetto 2014). They now combine with, at the conjunction of neoliberalism and anti-Covid measures, rhetoric that is pro-family, hetero-sexist, and moralist ('stay at home', 'family is the safest place') on one hand and with the individualization of the securitarian system on the other. People are encouraged to involve themselves in the policing and disciplining of neighbours, passers-by, and strangers until they accuse and violently attack others by the reiteration of securitarian discourse that instigates moral panic against the 'spreaders'. The body and its movements are always more and more policed and valued by the big data industry, data that is made available to large international companies by the security apparatus of nation states. Contrarily, in the domestic space the contradiction is intensified between, on one hand, the feeling of solitude derived from the precariousness of the job market and its resulting solitary and selfish competition (marked by the drastic reduction of union protections) and, on the other hand, the reproductive imperatives founded on hierarchies of gender, hetero-patriarchal family models, and the idea of a nation (and of a Europe) that is white and is a property to 'defend' (one need only think of the absence of protections for undocumented migrants, for refugees in welcome centres, for the most marginalized, impoverished, and racialized populations to whom the state does not guarantee neither a residence permit, nor housing, social support, or strategies for personal protection). Our relationship with all of this is necessarily ambivalent: immersed in neoliberal dynamics and in a "risk society" (Beck 1992), defined by social and environmental disasters that are the results of the logic of exploitation and of extractivism and (geo)ontologies of the Anthropocene, which are precarious in regards to work and affects in their neoliberal acceleration (Povinelli 2016), we are critical in the regard of heteronormativity and pro-family imperatives, which then come to affect the private sphere. For this reason, we have created forms of communities that resist and mutually support each other, founded on the idea that 'care of oneself=care of others'; communities that are not closed nor closed-off by the fear of invasion (i.e. anti-migrant rhetoric) or by moral panic towards others ("you are limited to your family members and significant others," according to the Decree-Law announced on 4 May 2020).

We act in line with what Sara Ahmed (25 August 2014), recalling Audre Lorde (1988), believes to be the "care of oneself": a subversive act that is not a "power technology" (Foucault 1976) but an act of war because "in directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting

care away from its proper objects” (Ahmed 2014), or rather towards those who the hetero-patriarchal system defines as ‘objects of care’ (children, husbands, seniors) for feminized subjects. This subversive act is such only because it is interdependent from the care of others:

in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters. (Ahmed 2014)

Finally, we are critical in regard to the normalization of the ‘healthy and sanitized body’, as much performative and ‘able’ as it is ascetic, permeabilized against the ‘contact-contagion’, not because we believe that it is not important to preserve ourselves and others, and especially the most vulnerable, from sicknesses; but because we believe that the deconstructive criticism of social and bodily norms of ‘social distancing’ (a very significant expression given the abovementioned context) allows for us to take an individual and collective political stand against authoritative disciplinary forms sold to us as necessary and against the elaboration of care practices founded on responsibility. This criticism is not in conflict, but rather goes hand in hand with the awareness that the deconstruction of the national healthcare system and the absence of a global healthcare system are the result of a selective logic – once again, neoliberal – that privileges the wellness and the health of both those who can pay for it and of the part of society that must be defended for a whole series of reasons defined by specific standards of age, gender, health, race, and sexuality.

Our objective was to force ourselves to perform some of the emotions that have sprung from “control,” “isolation,” and “social distancing” – constriction, solitude, fear, distance, absence, and deficiency are some of these emotions – in this way attempting to unravel them. The voice that accompanies the photos is a situated, single, and at the same time collective voice: it represents a point of view, a tangle of emotions that reflects the solitary lived experience of one of us who is also immediately *in relation* to the rest of us, and in absence of *the other*. Their tangle of emotions is represented here in a circular manner because the pandemic invades both spaces of the present and future as well as spaces of memory, reassembling sensations and absences that today are filtered by the fear of the end and by solitude: we are unable to know if the first moment of reflection (fig. 1) is followed by an encounter with *her* – a loved one, a friend, a sister, infected or simply isolated, distant/absent for a short while or forever – (fig. 2, 3, 4, and 5) or if the encounter is just a dream, a memory, or an obsession. In fact, the corporeal interweaving (fig. 6, 7, and 8) that follows is the result of solitary work related to absences and presences, memories, desires, and hopes. The circle is completed by the image of a body that is once again alone (fig. 9).

To be able to unveil these emotions we needed to first render them visible: we therefore used a medium – plastic – that today is truly *caught in the middle*, a cumbersome element that

envelops not only bodies by distancing them from each other, but also one's imagination, sensations, and desires. As if it were the great chronotype of this century, or rather a place and moment through which one can re-visualize the means of individual relationships and reform social relationships, for us plastic assumes the connotation of the means of excellence for psychological and physical alienation from others and it represents the crumbling of that which is *in common*.

The set was organized in an apartment at Rua Rafael de Andrade 19 in Lisbon where Gaia Giuliani and the photographer Ida Fiele (aka Fidelia Avanzato) live. After a long quarantine alone, they prepared the set together with HIV+ activist and performer Paolo Gorgoni, who was also emerging from a long self-isolation. The scene and selection of materials were the result of a close dialogue between the three, based on years of artistic and intellectual collaboration and on a strong friendship. The set was fruit of improvisation, starting with a shared storyboard structured in indoor scenes that depicted sensations and moods, as well as actual bodily conditions. The inside of a house/prison in the time of Covid-19 is thematized here as a place/shelter and at the same time a precursory place of dangerous absences that ensnare desires, reduce affects, and cause obsessions to run rampant. It is a place of reflection – for us it was a laboratory for anything and everything, but also and most of all it was a lab of estrangement and solitude, different than the media vulgarity and the biopolitics of containment that described closing oneself in one's home as residing serenely in the most safe and reassuring place. The three authors of this study experienced the domestic space in both ways, thanks to the strong network of emotional support and the absence of toxic relationships. The communities that they are part of – Gorgoni's friends and roommates on one hand, and the family composed of Avanzato, Giuliani, and their cat Ugo on the other – allowed the collective elaboration of these emotions and states of consciousness to give life to this present work.

Upon deciding to work together we assumed the risk of infection. Even though it was low or null, we decided that it was worth the risk in order to give a sense of collectivity to our experience. Assuming this risk also meant that we had to assume a sense of responsibility towards others, and therefore we had to practice safety measures in regard to other people with whom we came into contact in the days following our encounter, allowing them to protect themselves by practicing physical distancing from us.

The selection of plastic as *the means* by which we looked at our bodies, at present and absent affects, and at silences hinges on the fact that it has entered our personal and collective lived experiences in a massive way: masks, gloves, uniforms, goggles, visors, etc. are the devices to which utmost importance is ascribed on a global scale as an immediate (and long-lasting) mass containment measure; devices which contribute to create estrangement and absence. The faces of neighbours, lovers, and relatives are now counterfeit, whereas, regarding touch, our hands do not encounter the warmth of other hands. On the other hand, only for some people was plastic not already a part – even if not in a widespread way – of daily life, be

it relational or sexual plastic. For us, in regard to the personal and collective history of those who developed this study, plastic had already been, for a long time, a method of preservation, containment, and physical and social distancing, since it is related to the prevention of HIV. Plastic has been engraved with the moral stigma of promiscuity which today, in the era of Covid-19, risks becoming a 'moral stigma of proximity'. We are referring to the 'moral stigma of proximity' as the stigma generated during lockdown in regard to those who have 'antisocial' behaviours (who are therefore seen as vectors of contagion): one need only think of the physical proximity of strangers during large gatherings, not to mention the sexual proximity with strangers (where the other *is outside* of the domestic space) for which the stigma is not generated in reference to the exchange of bodily fluids, but rather by the mere presence of the other. If sexuality, beginning with the outbreak of HIV, was profoundly stigmatized, and particularly sexuality that was non hetero-direct (especially that of men who have sex with men) and that which was related to the exchange of sex/money, today sexuality is stigmatized as antisocial when it happens outside of the familial context and of so-called "family members including significant others" (defined as "stable affects" by the Decree-Law of May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020). While condoms covered the obscene object of contagion during anti-AIDS discourse, today, masks and gloves are worn as on par with clothing, to preserve nudity which, up until a few months ago, was not considered as such. The ideological value and the semiotic capacity of the 'stigma of proximity' clearly emerge when one thinks of those who, during the lockdown, were forced to work in unprotected places: forced proximity in places of work (factories, farms, logistic offices in the North and fields in the South) was silently legitimated and juxtaposed to the more free, political, and subversive proximity (think of the sinister equivalence between the ban of gatherings and the ban of protests) that was also outside the realm of 'stable' – disciplined, controlled, and controllable – relationships.

The plastic that wraps around hands and faces, or whole bodies, is today considered by everyone to be a tool of social levelling: it responds to an epidemic that is potentially able to affect anyone who wears this uniform which hides class elements. In reality, plastic is the symbol of social inequalities and of the differentiated access to personal and collective health and safety: it is renowned in the history of contamination from nuclear waste and of epidemics that have caused and are causing victims outside of Europe and the West, precariousness and vulnerability (Butler 2004; 2009), it marks the boundary between who can protect themselves and who cannot (Giuliani 2020b), who has the right to breathe and who doesn't (Mbembe 2020). In our case, plastic marks the safe space in which we find ourselves, being, the authors of this study, people who, contrarily to many others, have white skin, European citizenship, a roof over their heads, and income and/or financial support. This – even if in vastly differing capacities determined by chronic illnesses and various pathologies – renders us privileged in regard to many forms of misery and vulnerability, not solely related to the virus.

Starting from this specific "politics of location" (Rich 1987), which describes us and does

not absolve us, and from the awareness of our own “white fragility” (DiAngelo 2018) at the face of the enormity of the effects of Anthropocene violence, such as the Covid-19 epidemic, outside of the borders and at the margins of the West, in our visual reflection plastic helped unveil our polysemic relationship with physical, social, and imaginative barriers. Plastic was, in addition to a garment, “habitus” that ensnares social conduct; in addition to external frill, internalized norm that disciplines affective relationships; in addition to a real containment and isolation device, the fruit of imagination that reveals how the idea of oneself and of others is already enveloped by synthetic impermeable fabrics.

We used two kinds of plastic: one that wraps up our bodies and contains them (the kind of transparent plastic wrap used to preserve food) and one that separates physical spaces (light, translucent plastic sheets that are used to protect furniture). Both impede what Sara Ahmed defined as “skin-to-skin intimacy” (2000), or rather the sometimes-silent proximity that permits communication between individuals and between individuals and other living beings. They impede one from sensing the “trans-corporeal interdependence” between beings, and in particular between human beings, to use the expression coined by Stacey Alaimo (2008; 2010; 2018), and the “intra-activity interdependence” that the feminist physicist Karen Barad (2007; 2008) considers to pre-exist actions and choices and is the terrain onto which individual subjectivity is born. A subjectivity that is nourished by exchanges, by affective connections, by forms of dependency without which it would not exist.

In the permanence of “moral panic” (Giuliani 2020b), which is the product of, and which itself reproduces, atomization, isolation, and estrangement, plastic becomes the manifestation of the fear of both the infected *other* and *their* incontrovertible absence. It is this tension between attraction and repulsion that guides our photographic journey. And with it, the fear that the memory of contact is forever jeopardized by having plastic *in between*, or rather the fear that such a jeopardy will prevent us from imagining new “strange encounters” (Ahmed 2000) in the future, made of flesh, mouths, skin, liquids, and heat inside and outside of the domestic space, inside and throughout closed communities as mandated by the biopolitics of containment. Among us, there is in fact the fear that, by confining the body into its boundaries, the plastic *inside of us* will obstruct the fantasy of new intersections and that it will conceal, distance, and conform the body forever, rendering ourselves and other people present and absent at the same time. Finally, there is the fear that moral panic will make the loss of people – especially of people who don’t know each other – something less valuable, insignificant, worthless – immaterial numeric data, indifferent, plasticized.

On the other hand, even though fear was at the centre of our reflections, what especially connected our work was that idea that only together – breaking *together* the lines of separation and distances and resisting in different ways the disciplining and segregating dystopias founded on the fear of the *other* as mandated by the biopolitics of containment – we can design something different, different than this, but also different from what was here before (Giuliani 2020a).



Pandemic: A Six-Handed Study



Fig. 1. What lies beyond the eyes: a night swallows the next, in weeks that last a day, in hours that last months. Spit what I can't keep within, in soft swirls. Stay inside, drown there.



Fig. 2. I imprinted the shapes of your body on a veil so that I can touch them when nobody sees me. Suspended in memory while still alive, you are a Shroud on screen, AD 2020.



Fig. 3. Heat passes through surfaces. Our curtain will be thin, so that every spark becomes a warm halo with your features. And so that you can caress me before your arms grow cold.



Fig. 4. Will it be elastic enough, resistant enough, aseptic enough, safe enough? At most, it'll guide us through crossings we've been unaware of.





Fig. 5. Let's get back into the Russian doll: in the beginning there was the plastic-wrapped candy, then came the blowjob with a condom, then, finally, we decided that skin itself was just too dangerous. How many layers are left between the inside and the outside?



Fig. 6. No place is harder to reach than here, now. In fact, we haven't even set foot there yet.



Fig. 7. Thigh or chest? We are under the sheath like skin underneath a layer of hot wax: if you tear it off properly, it only hurts for a second. We will do it slowly, one millimetre at a time, in the most inefficient and painful way.



Fig. 8. They bring us to the table. Together. They will eat us wrapped, without even chopping us up. Not that it matters, since we're not here.





Fig. 9. We are all alone, see?

### Note

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**Paolo Gorgoni** is on the board of directors for Plus APS, an Italian network of LGBT people living with HIV, in addition to being a member of GAT Portugal (Grupo Ativistas em Tratamentos) and a Community Representative and member of the Deliberative Committee of Fast Track Cities Lisbon – Lisboa Sem SIDA (<https://www.lisboa.pt/en/lisboasemside>). This last initiative is part of a worldwide network of cities committed to strengthening the local response to the HIV epidemic in order to eliminate HIV by 2030, reaching zero new infections (<http://www.fast-trackcities.org/>). Gorgoni incorporates performance art, activism, political involvement, and community empowerment into their project "Dragtivism for Transformation," writing, composing, singing, acting, and developing work under the name of Paula Lovely. The key of their artistic research is rewriting the narrative around HIV by providing a contemporary vision recounted by people living with HIV and working on all the possible and necessary intersections between art, activism, and the universe of drag. [www.dragtivismfortransformation.wordpress.com](http://www.dragtivismfortransformation.wordpress.com)

**Ida Fiele, aka Fidelia Avanzato** was drawn to photography as a child, when she first held her grandfather's Voigtlander in her hands, which she studied with a fearful reverence. She has taken some photography lessons but is mostly self-taught. She takes digital shots but is still fascinated by simple, analogical, and disposable tools and materials. She is interested in pinhole cameras and tries to incorporate them in her studies. In Lisbon she works with photography relative to queer and transgender imagination because she is fascinated by the expression of a corporeality that is powerful in its expressive vindication. In the last year she has been working on a photographic project on bodily memory, with the purpose of revealing the soul's profound emotional experiences beginning with the body's physical reaction in the space in front of the camera lens.

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