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Phygital; Identity, Identifying, and Self- Portraiture in the Covid-19 Pandemic

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to many parts of our lives. For the Lisbon based artist Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf the new reality fundamentally changed and evolved her work. This latest work confronts her experience of the moment and reflects it the same way the moment defined works like the Vitruvian Man by Da Vinci and Cindy Sherman's first photo album in the 1970's.

KEY WORDS

Feminism
Self Portrait
Pandemic Art
Identity



Figure 1: Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, Relentless Hope, 2021. Mixed media vinyl on aluminium. 200x250cm. Lisbon. © of Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf

INTRODUCTION

Krista Tippet begins each podcast episode of On Being with gratitude for the sponsors of the show. One sponsor in particular, the John Templeton Foundation, is presented as “investigating the most perplexing questions facing human kind; Who are we? Why are we here? And where are we going?” (Tippet)

Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf engages with these questions pragmatically in her art. She answers them for herself and invites you to do the same.

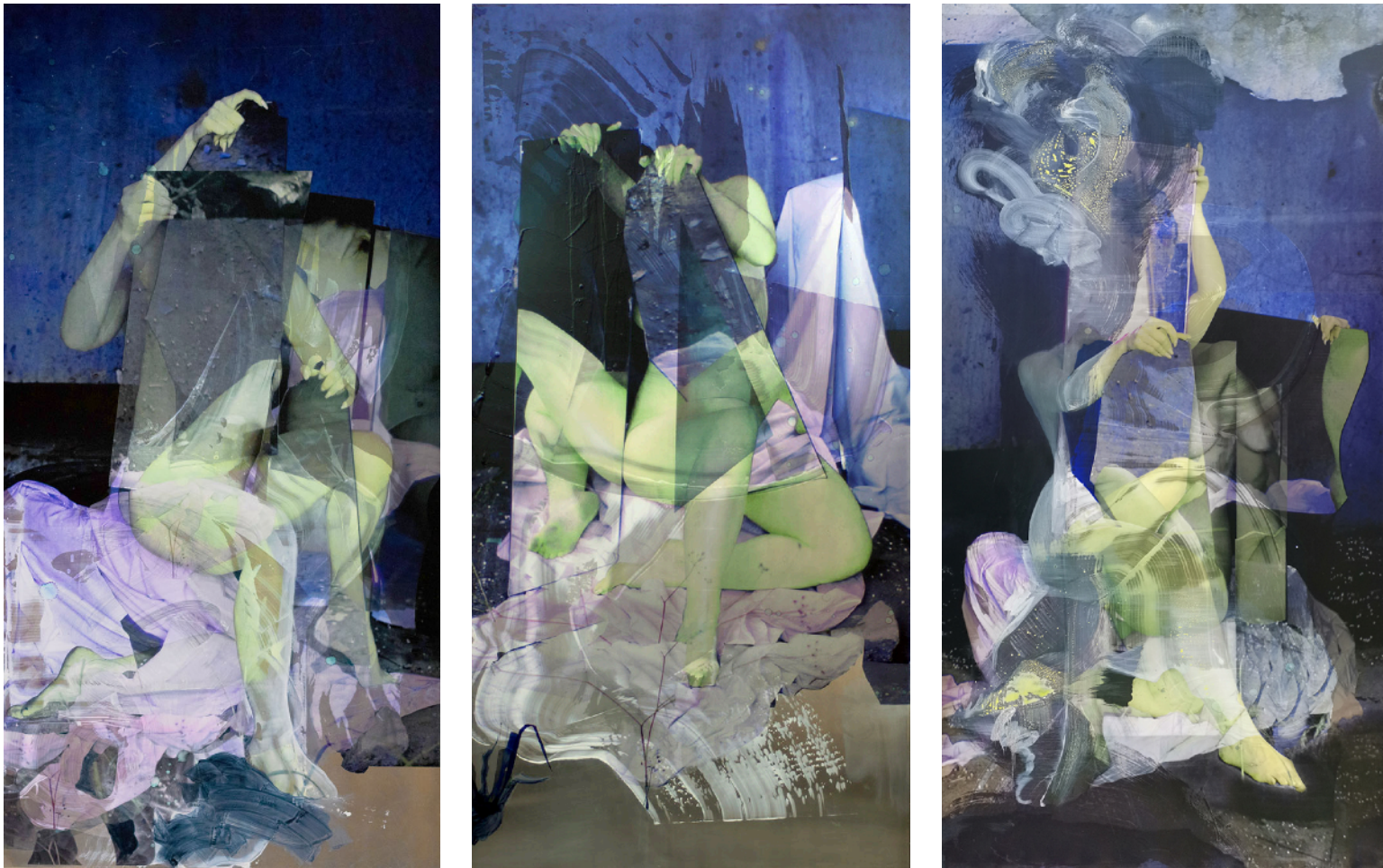


Figure 2: Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, Luminous Dark 1, Luminous Dark 2, Luminous Dark 3, 2021. Mixed media vinyl on aluminum. 100x200cm each. Lisbon. © Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf

WHO ARE WE?

Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, a British-German artist based in Lisbon, is exploring the self-portrait of the moment (Augenblick).

Her most recent work, which was shown at the MOVART Marvilla Art District Open studio October 28th, 2021, is a mixture of physical and digital manipulations of self portrait photography. The mixed media (vinyl print on aluminum with oil paint) artworks are instantly attention getting for their size and detail. As you approach the work and spend only a mere second looking into the deep and intricate layers you realize just as much is revealed as is obfuscated by the fractured-ness of the collage.

In her own words Rebecca describes this most recent work as embodying both “chaos and control” since there is a messy and precise expression. The work is born in this moment, the COVID-19 pandemic, and being a figurative painter isolated in an apartment in a foreign country with primarily digital interactions. They are an evolution of previous work but also a significant departure from it.

Unable to invite friends and other people to sit for paintings or photos, in March 2020 Rebecca became her own and only model at the start of the first lockdown in Portugal. With some discarded broken mirrors, a home-printer, A4 paper, and plenty of time on her hands, the evolution of her work began to take shape.



Figure 3. Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas*, A, B, C, 1929. Prints on pinboard. 100x125cm.

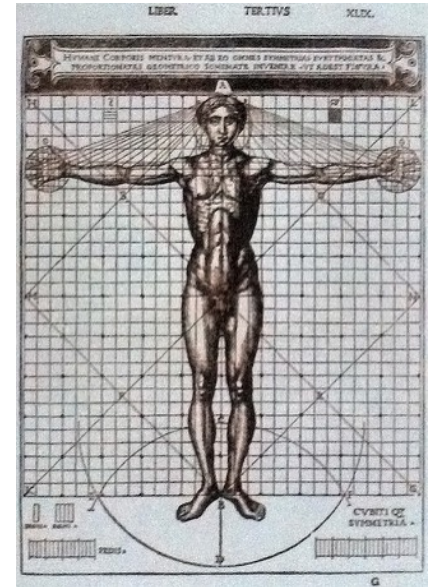
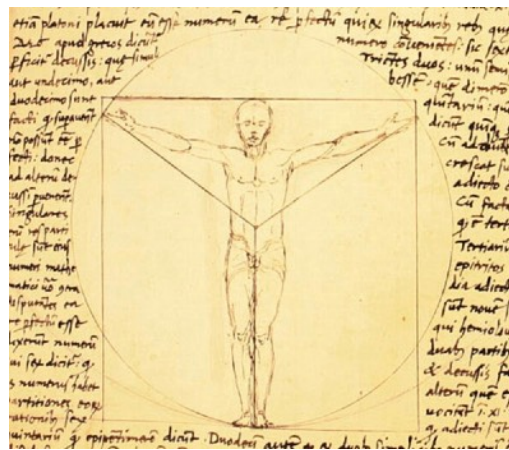
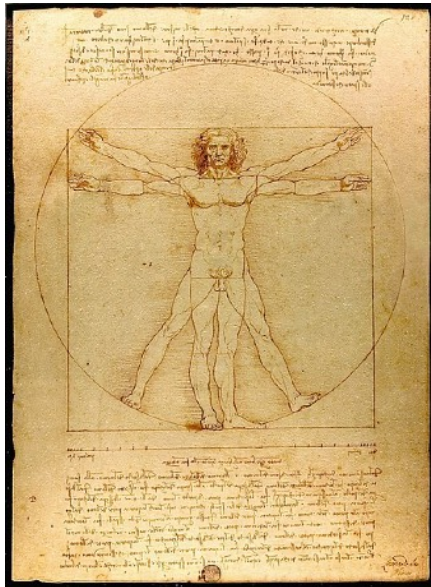
Courtesy of The Warburg Institute

The exploration of the self, or the self-portrait, is ancient artistic practice. Aby Warburg's Atlas starts the first three panels (A, B, and C) with this same exploration. Panel A are maps that provide the local context, then Panel B are maps of human proportions, anatomy, and relation to cosmology, and Panel C is the map of the universe and where we might be within that larger context.

Panel B consists of nine interpretations of the human (male) body at different times in history. The examples of proportion study are reflections of theory that anatomy, spirituality and nature are in harmony in the human shape. Whether its the zodiac or as God's creation it is presumed that by investigating the human itself we can learn something about something greater than ourself. "Their intention was to discover the ideal in an attempt to define the normal" [Panofsky, 94]

In the center of the Panel is the Vitruvian Man, by Leonardo DaVinci. Arguably the most famous study of human proportion by an artist. At the time in the

Renaissance movement DaVinci was one of dozens of contemporaries investigating human proportion in a similar manner, the out stretched limbs of a naked man decorated with geometry. This was the self-portrait of the moment. "The renaissance fused...the cosmological interpretation of the theory of proportions with the classical notion of "symmetry" as the fundamental principle of aesthetic" [Panofsky, 89]



Left, Figure 5 da Vinci, Leonardo, Vitruvian Man, C. 1490. Pen and ink with washover metalpoint on paper. 34.6cm x 25.5cm. Venice. Courtesy of Galeria d'ell Academia

Center, Figure 4 Cesariano, Cesare, Vitruvian Man, C. 1521. Illustration, ink on paper. 42.2cm x 29.6cm. Venice. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Right, Figure 6 Andrea, Giacomo, Vitruvian Man Prototype, C. 1490. Pen and ink on paper. 17.5cm x 15cm. Ferrera. Courtesy of Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea

Warburg's first three panels, and perhaps the entire Atlas if viewed as a whole, is also his self-portrait and reflection of his place in the world. Although he was a historian and an intellectual more than an artist it's easy to consider the Atlas an artistic work - words to a poet. "His Atlas,... is an "attempt" or "experiment" not promising perfection and insofar as it is a highly personal, self reflexive artifact."(Johnson, 190) A historian whose medium is picture atlas.

The first three panels are the convergence of Hellenistic, Near Eastern, and European astronomy, geography, and anatomy which are mediated by the Renaissance, by the human and the divine. (Johnson, 183) Warburg did not leave behind a guide on how to interpret the Panels or the collection so it's up to each viewer to imbue their own meaning. One interpretation is that the Panels are a way to create an afterlife of his work and ideas, and the works represented in it in his own interpretation of their interrelation (Johnson, 179). This is where Panel B stands out compared to the other two in the beginning. It is the one that relates the human form to another order. Humans as carriers of the zodiac, as mathematical reflections or ripples through the universe, or as god's creation.



Figure 7: Van Rijn, Rembrandt, The Night Watch, 1642. Oil on canvas. 363cm 437cm. Amsterdam. Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum.



Left, Figure 8: Van Rijn, Rembrandt, Self Portrait, 1640. Oil on canvas. 102cm x 80cm. London. Courtesy of The National Gallery.

Right, Figure 9: Van Rijn, Rembrandt, The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, 1632. Oil on canvas. 169cm x 216cm. Amsterdam. Courtesy of Mauritshuis den Hague

The notion of exploring human form or anatomy is repeated in generations after DaVinci. Take for example paintings by Rembrandt depicting dissection. Rembrandt took the self-portrait to all levels within his paintings; placing himself in the scene, painting himself alone, and paintings of humans just as they are. The dissections in particular show the curiosity of the artist to understand the human form and being human, which is a reflection on his own experience.

“The new genre of fine art photography - which has largely replaced portrait painting - has been used for self-portraiture by some of the greatest photographers of the 20th century. Perhaps the most prolific creator of photographic self-portraits is Cindy Sherman (b. 1954).” (Horne) In the panel

series "Luminous Dark" we see a nude female body hidden behind a mirror that reflects parts of the body and surroundings. "I approach my work from the perspective of a painter, so the work is constructed as such, even though I'm not painting" Rebecca said to me in an interview in November 2021. Cindy Sherman describes her work similarly, she is an artist who's medium is photography" (Kimmelman, 148). Sherman's work is different from what Rebecca is doing though in that Sherman describes her work as not about herself, they are portraits of facades, the masks and characters women play in society for example, not a collection of her own experiences per se (Kimmelman, 155). Rebecca on the other hand has brought her experience directly into the frame and into the finished work by saying the reality of the moment is behind a digital screen but in the physical world and the composition of the work does the same.

Photography was turned toward the self before it was turned towards other people. Photos of places and scenery were common before photos of people (Stewart). Some of the first photos ever taken were photos of the human self, the body and again of dissection.

Both the panel series "Luminous Dark" and the triptych "Relentless Hope" expose the inner-self of the artist and her experience of this moment and simultaneously shroud it in mystery. This dialectic experience is very relatable for anyone living this moment. We are at once reminded of our human vulnerabilities, be it physical or mental health or otherwise, and the incongruous options available to us to interact with our world.

A prominent feature of Rebecca's current work is the piece of broken mirror which hides her face and reflects a part of the scene from an otherwise unseen perspective. It is also an invitation though for the viewer to see themselves in it and reflect about how they hide and show themselves simultaneously. During the past two years (2020-22) many people have become confronted with themselves in new ways. Being alone, being

vulnerable, being separate from their “normal” lives and being scared of the new reality. This is how Rebeccas work is the self portrait of the moment, that builds on the history of portraiture and self-portraiture but places it in the contemporary.



Figure 10: Sherman, Cindy, Madonna, 1975. Gelatin Silverprint. 25.4cm x 20.3cm. New York. Courtesy of HK Art Advisory and Projects.

“Sherman’s art...was confrontational...people couldn’t take for granted what they were looking at.” (Kimmelman, 148) which is to say “what is the nature of the relation between the artwork and the spectator?” (Johnson, 190) It was also “...quintessentially of the [1900’s feminist moment].” Sherman’s characters and photographs invite the same reflection. To see the artist, the artist as character, and to see yourself in the scene.

DaVinci and other’s investigation of human proportions during the renaissance was an exploration of the self. The presentation of which was an

invitation to reflect and to become aware of oneself. Rembrandt showed us the human condition as if to say “this is also you.” Both of these only existed because of their context.



Figure 11: Van Gogh, Vincent, Self-Portrait, 1889. Oil on canvas. 55x85cm. Oslo. Courtesy of the National Museum for Art, Architecture, and Design.

From this point its easy to say that all art does this to an extent, it can invite the viewer to reflect about the human condition and their present experiences. But the self portraits of Van Gogh are substantially of a different influence for example. His portraits of himself over time hint at his mental illness and in general they are considered to be done to “practice portraiture” more than anything else. (Van Gogh Museum) The paintings of himself are not born from the moment even though they are about his experience and himself.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

""Most depictions of women, pre [new wave] feminism, were exploitative, but I take that for granted. The female nude in art is something that we've to live with because people will always use it as a symbol of beauty. It bores me to tears. But if male artists only did male nudes, women would complain, 'Oh they think their bodies are so great.' One way or the other people are going to find a way to object."" (Kimmelman, 155)

"Ask a historian "What was mankind's greatest invention?" Fire? The wheel? The sword? I would argue it's history itself. History isn't fact. It's narrative, one carefully curated and shaped. Under the pen strokes of the right scribe, a villain becomes a hero, a lie becomes the truth." (Dawson)

What is absent from Warburg's first three Panels? Any work definitely by a woman, which is why it is a self-portrait of his own experience in the world and his own existence, similar to Van Gogh's paintings of himself.



Figure 12: Anguissola, Sofonisba, Self-portrait at an Easel, C.1556. Oil on canvas. 66cm x 57cm. London. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.

In 1556 Sofonisba Anguissola painted herself at an easel painting the Virgin Mary and Christ. Borzello describes woman self-portraiture as “a way to present a story about herself for public consumption.”(Borzello) At the time everything about this particular self-portrait was outlawed. Women painting, women painting themselves, women painting devotional paintings. This was all a highly punishable act. But the work survived and it tells the story of the moment and her experience at once.

Rebecca’s presence in her work is in part circumstance as mentioned, but the circumstance became a catalyst for the reflective process of the creation. Although the circumstance was different for Anguissola there was, like for Rebecca, also no one else to paint.

Just down the street, at almost the same time as Rebecca’s show, another prominent gallery showed the work of Jose Pedro Cortes and described the collection as “an ongoing dialogue...using photography as a tool to explore the surface of the moment we live in.” (Fino) In contrast to Rebecca’s work though this collection is a monotone diary entry that doesn’t relate to any experience of the moment other than his own - bored rather than confronted with himself. This is apparent because the photos in the collection could easily have been taken *at any other moment in time*, whereas Rebecca’s work only exists because of everything else happening right then in that moment.

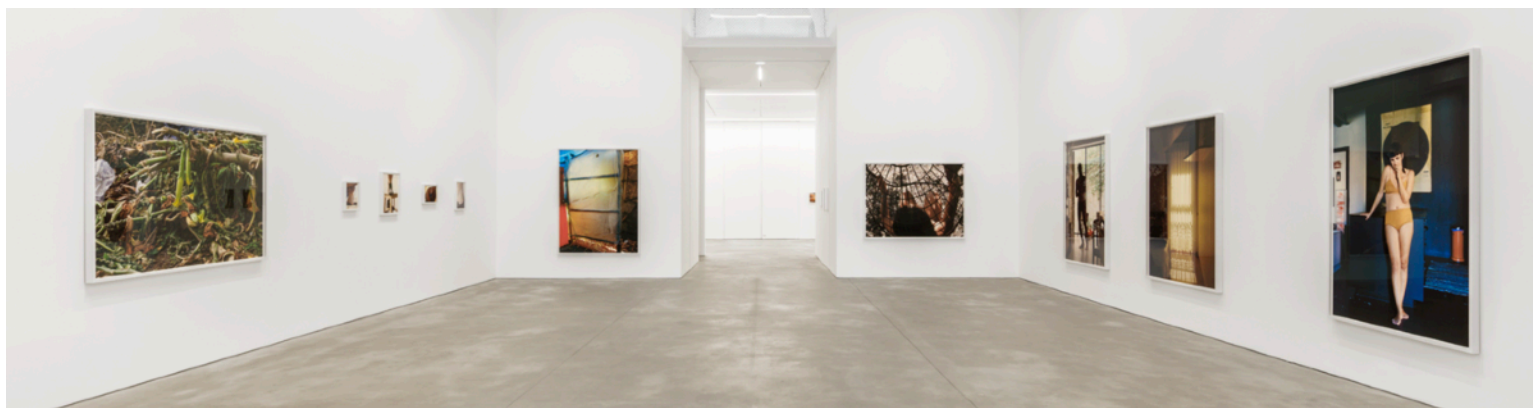
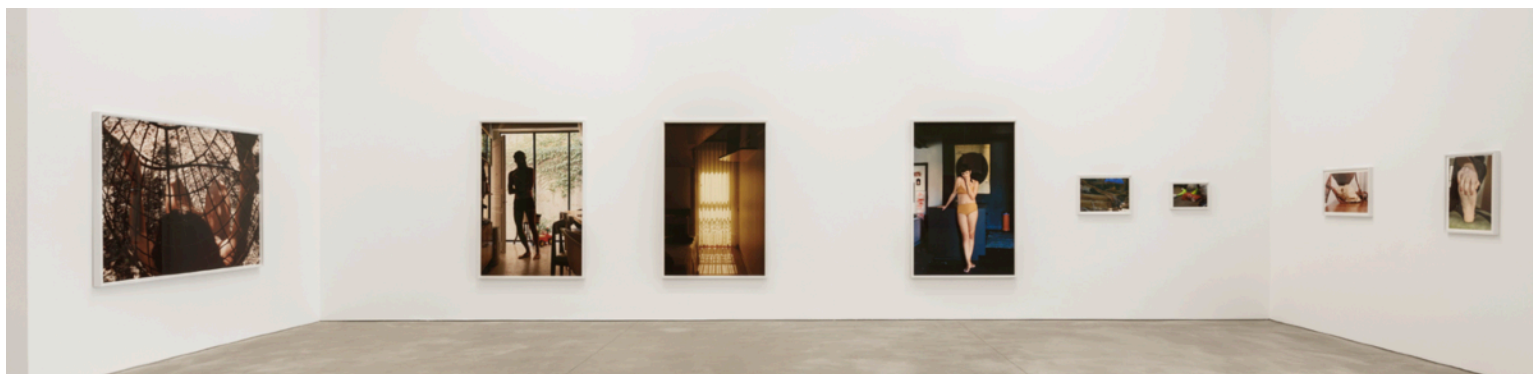


Figure 13, Francisco Fino Gallery, Body Capital, Exhibition 2021. Various dimensions. Lisbon © Francisco Fino Gallery

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Rebecca says this work is not done, she has more to do in this direction with the medium and message of the work.

As the ratcheted straps seem to loosen slowly on our lives an obvious entirely new normal becomes apparent just beyond the horizon. Not only did we our individual selves change and evolve but everything else and everyone else evolved as well in their own way. The experiences of lockdowns, mask wearing, social distancing, and isolation have wreaked havoc on our relations with others and with ourselves.

Here again Rebecca's experience of this moment becomes present in this work because it is not only a physical work, created through numerous digital processes, and physical manipulations, it is massive. The triptych "Relentless Hope" fills most any wall, measuring 200cm x 250cm, and it is meant to be experienced in real life and to confront our experiences of the recent past. "[Physical art] is an antidote to the relentless [isolation] initiated by the pandemic." (Stewart)

Whether we continue to oscillate between modes of isolation and modes of connection remains to be seen. Rebecca though will surely continue to confront us with her experiences of that evolution.

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