

Letter from Paris

Palisades

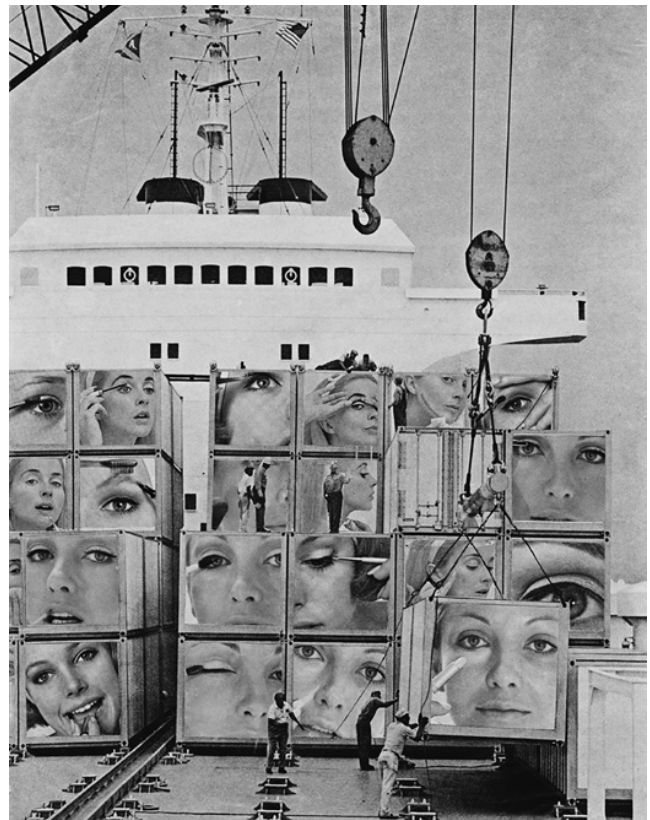
At the time of departure, a nationwide lockdown in Italy had been put in place, while the UK was still in its delusional ‘contain’ phase with Boris Johnson reassuring the British public that he was ‘shaking hands continuously’ with NHS workers, advising the UK to carry on as usual. Standing in passport control at St Pancras International station, everything seemed as ordinary as any other journey; trains were running to schedule with only the odd passenger wearing a face mask, which isn’t unusual to see in London even when there isn’t a global pandemic. A young family sitting opposite on the train were taking their daughter on a surprise trip to Disneyland Paris. People seemed relatively unfazed, and it was still very much ‘wash your hands and business as usual’, in the PM’s own words (along with ‘take it on the chin’).

This trip had been booked at the beginning of the year ostensibly to review Rachel Rose’s solo show at Lafayette Anticipations, but also as a convenient excuse to take the temperature of other gallery programmes in the city. At the time of visiting, Jeu de Paume was hosting ‘The Supermarket of Images’, a group show riffing on Peter Szendy’s 2019 book *The Supermarket of the Visible: Toward a General Economy of Images*, which explores the saturation of images in visual culture in an era when ‘the space of visibility is inundated’. Artworks by over 54 artists spanning the high modernism of the early 20th century to the more recent post-internet past were loosely amalgamated into five socio-economic categories: Stocks, Raw Material, Work, Money and Exchange, as three curators tried to shed light on the ‘fluid viscosity’ and ‘fluctuating values’ of image production and distribution. It was a sprawling exhibition which largely read as a clumsy reconfiguration of well-trodden biennale fodder, with familiar contributions from Trevor Paglen, Andreas Gursky, Zoe Leonard, Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl sitting awkwardly alongside more memorable or illuminating historical artefacts, such as Kazimir Malevich’s diagrammatic image categorisation charts, early footage by the Lumière Brothers, Robert Bresson’s trailer for *L’Argent*, 1933, or the cute pairing of an 1880’s-era zoetrope with William Kentridge’s flipbook film *Second-Hand Reading*, 2013. In these instances, looking beyond the recent past succeeded in pulling contemporary debates into sharper focus, more so than predictably inviting viewers to interpret Walter Benjamin’s envisaging of ‘100 percent image space’ through overwhelming photographic displays, provided here by Evan Roth’s heavy-handed data dump of web images *Since You Were Born*, 2019–20, pasted on gallery walls.

On the other side of the Tuileries Gardens, Claude Monet’s permanent curving, bruised and blushed water lily murals in the Musée de l’Orangerie offered a meditative antidote to Jeu de Paume’s contrived image saturation, and a reminder of the slow, enduring relevance of art throughout history. Housed in two oval rooms shaped like an infinity symbol, which have been rebuilt several times (after wars and natural decay), there is a reassuring permanence to these immersive paintings, particularly in the face

of a crisis subtly indicated by the handful of fellow tourists sitting on benches, some wearing face masks and looking at the paintings, others glued to the news on their phones.

Along the Seine, further social-distancing measures merged with security checks in Ulla Von Brandenburg’s solo exhibition exploring the ‘codes of scenography’ at Palais de Tokyo. Five ‘shelters’ were constructed from sheets of fabric, reminiscent of stage curtains and installed across the ground-floor galleries. Oversized theatrical props with a rural twist occupied these discrete ‘rooms’ alongside inert cloth mannequins, proxies for absent performers who activated the makeshift stages at weekends. Brandenburg’s 16mm film depicting the 19th-century ‘Theatre due Peuple de Bussang’, the first post-revolution people’s theatre established in France on the side of the Vosges mountains, held the conceptual threads together. The film visualises a ‘micro-society as though they were the last of their kind’, elaborately scored and choreographed by the artist and performed by a community of actors seemingly cut off from the outside world, but living and working in harmony. In the accompanying exhibition notes, Brandenburg explains how she ‘sees her exhibition as a collective ritual, a way for her to explore the relationship between the individual and the group’. But this exploration of individual agency and idealised communal, rural isolation rings hollow. Exhibitions do not exist in a vacuum, and social relations are constantly undergoing transformation both inside and outside the gallery, underlined at this particular moment by a series of unsettling laminated signs dotted around gallery walls featuring two figures separate by a ‘1m’ arrow.



Martha Rosler, *Cargo Cult*, 1966–72, from the series ‘Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain’, from ‘The Supermarket of Images’ at Jeu de Paume

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Rose's solo show at Lafayette Anticipations opened on the evening my colleague and I arrived, but given the anxiety around contagion we eschewed the private view and visited the next morning instead. Nestling in the backstreets of the Marais, Lafayette Anticipations is housed in a 19th-century building, remodelled by Rem Koolhaas's OMA agency into a uniquely adaptable 'curatorial machine'. Its signature moveable ceilings and floors, however, are largely obscured by Rose's slick exhibition design, which comprises a maze of screening environments seducing visitors with thick pile carpet and high-spec projections. *The Borns*, a series of polished egg-shaped minerals leaking smoky glass appendages, are suggestive of gestation and, displayed under spotlights like designer jewellery, they set the futuristic tone and high-production values for the rest of the exhibition. Subsequent video works loosely chart an embodied lifecycle journey, moving from birth and childhood to adulthood and death as Rose entangles existential anxieties around human and non-human existence, science and the occult in deftly executed animation, and both found and captured footage. Better known works *Palisades in Palisades*, 2013, and *A Minute Ago*, 2014, are curiously excluded in favour of whimsical cel-animated *Lake Valley*, 2016, and the cinematic mysticism of *Wil-o-Wisp*, 2018, alongside a few duds in the shape of a banal composite photograph *The Camargue Horse*, 2020, and one-liner *Autoscopic Egg*, 2017, featuring Fred Astaire dancing through the lens of electrocuted resin. The highlight is a mesmerising wall of LED screens narrating astronaut David Wolf's account of his spacewalk in *Everything and More*, 2015, installed on the rooftop terrace and visually embodying zero gravity as images dissolve through filtered sunlight.

The rest of the afternoon was spent visiting the grand commercial galleries of the 4th arrondissement, each located in equally spacious and elegant historic buildings (Galerie Chantal Crousel, Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Almine Rech, Marian Goodman, Perrotin etc) but with largely forgettable exhibitions by their heavyweight (and conservative) stable of artists (Thomas Hirschhorn, Antony Gormley, James Welling). Younger galleries such as High Art and gb agency offered more memorable presentations in the shape of, respectively, a group show responding to the writing of Paris-based philosopher, psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger ('Borderlinking') and an understated but affecting duo of shows presenting the work of Hassan Sharif paired with that of Květoslava Fulierová and Július Koller. But we ran out of time to see any more, and late night plans to visit the Centre Pompidou were also cut short by the gallery closing its doors early due to concerns around Covid-19, which by the evening had escalated to Musée D'Orsay taking matters into its own hands and announcing its immediate closure from 6pm for the foreseeable future.

By Saturday morning the majority of museums and galleries were shut, apart from a handful of commercial spaces optimistically remaining open to welcome visitors with hand-sanitiser. We killed time before our return train to London by taking the metro to the north-eastern *banlieue* of Romainville to visit Komunuma, a city-sponsored experiment in gentrification initiated by Foundation Fimenco, which took hold of an 11,000sqm former pharmaceutical factory after the mayor of Paris designated the land for cultural use. An article in the *Art Newspaper* describes the endeavour as a 'collaborative



Sturtevant, *ça va aller (it will be ok)*, installation view, Air de Paris



Ulla von Bradenburg, *The middle is blue*, 2020, installation view, Palais de Tokyo

alliance between public and private sectors creating a small art ecosystem' by housing five galleries, which opened in October 2019, before further project spaces and artist residencies follow. On paper it aligns with the City of Paris's decades-long aim to transform the nearby suburbs by extending culture to 'Greater Paris' beyond the *périphérique*. But judging by the high-vis builders pushing around wheelbarrows of cement when we arrived, there's still some way to go, and of the galleries in situ - Air de Paris, Fabienne Leclerc, Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Vincent Sator and Jeune Création - only Air de Paris was open.

The gallery's co-founder and director, Florence Bonnefous, welcomed us with an elbow bump and introduced artworks by Eliza Douglas, Michel Houellebecq, Bruno Serralongue and Sturtevant installed in the ground-floor open-plan office, with staff working from tessellated furniture designed by Flint Jamison. Sturtevant also had a solo show upstairs, a restaging of her 1998 *'ça va aller'* show, but Florence said it was 'too fucking loud' to talk up there. On the floor above was the group exhibition *'El oro de los tigres'* taking Jorge Luis Borges' writing on blindness as a lens to reflect on the political resonance of colour across the globe, particularly in reference to yellow and recent *'gilet jaunes'* protests in France. Florence describes this pairing as Yin and Yang, the Yin being the cacophonous aggression of Sturtevant's six stammering videos of mechanical plush-toy piggies and ducks, combined with spliced American TV game shows, infomercials and broadcast footage of *Les Bleus*, the French national football team, all syncopated to techno music which

Bruce Hainley likens to vuvuzelas in a companion text. The soothing Yang is the quietude of woodcut prints and paintings by Jill Mulleady, Lucy Bull and other emerging artists afterwards. Upon leaving, Florence stops to ask if she can record a video of our responses to both exhibitions for the gallery's Instagram account. She's thinking on her feet for ways to stay connected with audiences in the face of imminent closure. But, feeling too put on the spot, I decline, mumbling something about not really using social media, realising afterwards that perhaps we were the only visitors that day.

Campoli Presti was due to open a Penny Goring exhibition that evening, and I still wonder whether it went ahead, as by the time we arrived home President Emmanuel Macron had announced the immediate nationwide closure of all public spaces, including cafes, bars and restaurants. Three weeks later I'm sitting at home, having just completed my third week in lockdown on Easter bank holiday, just after Boris Johnson has been released from St Thomas's Hospital where he had been treated in the intensive care unit. Visiting galleries now seems like a wildly indulgent luxury when even stepping outside is heavily restricted and involves the widespread policing of individual and collective behaviour. When everything eventually does get back to 'normal', whatever that means, I doubt the ecosystem of project spaces, blue-chip galleries, museums and collectors will return in the same form.

Amy Budd is curator of projects and exhibitions at Modern Art Oxford.



Rachel Rose, *Everything and More*, 2015, installation view, Lafayette Anticipations