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FRIEZE

'Closer' Asks Whether True Privacy is Still Possible

At Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, six filmic propositions look at intimacy in the digital age

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In their essay 'The Guild of the Brave Poor Things' (2017), artists Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos ponder whether true privacy is still a viable reality. This is an especially pertinent question for McArthur, whose own impaired mobility requires her to maintain proximity to others to carry out basic daily tasks and for whom the question of visibility can equate to a 'life or death situation'. It is likewise a concern in the digital realm, from which in seems any familiar notion of intimacy has been extinguished. The six filmic propositions in Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen's current group show, 'Closer', expand on this vision, presenting screens as portals that allow or deny access to personal narratives.



'Closer', 2022, exhibition view, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf. Courtesy: the artists and Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf; photo: Cedric Mussano

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Building on the exhibition's title, curator Kathrin Bentele has installed the works in a dark, carpeted space to induce visitors to enter the realm of digitally mediated intimacy. The odd, low angle viewpoint of Josiane M.H. Pozi's *1* (2021) points steadfastly at the artist's chin, as she rides in a taxi, checks into a hotel room then looks for the spa. Steffani Jemison's *Figure 8* (2021) presents a rotating, slow-motion, close-up of a dancer performing a backbend contortion, soundtracked by a looping harp melody. While Alejandro Cesarco's portrait of his photography teacher captures him, camera in hand sitting on the opposite side of a table, about to take a photo of the artist, who remains out of frame (*Mirrored Portrait*, 2015). In each of these works, the artists adopt a formal approach that situates the protagonists in close proximity to the viewers, enabling a better apprehension of the emotional implications of each scene.



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Conversely, in McArthur and Zavitsanos' *Scores for Carolyn* (2019), the screen is devoid of human presence. Instead, a distorted, slow-paced voice-over – the transcript of which appears against a static backdrop of grey asphalt – fills the space, describing the unique temporal perspective experienced by people with physical disabilities. In James Benning's *PLACE* (2020) and Tiffany Sia's *A Road Movie Is Impossible in Hong Kong* (2021), the protagonists likewise remain offscreen and are instead portrayed through a series of landscapes. Benning's 84-minute compilation of static shots features the Sego Canyon petroglyphs in Utah as well as a sequence of building facades behind which lived and worked autodidact artists including Henry Darger, Jesse Howard and Bill Taylor. These artists influenced Benning, whose anthropological mapping seeks to create an

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emotional distance by presenting biographical facts, free of moral interpretation. Sia's hikes on Lamma Island in Hong Kong honour all those who have engaged in political protests. Shot as if on a go-pro and projected simultaneously on a single screen, the resulting work is subjective, abstract, symbolic and hypnotic.



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All the works in 'Closer' deviate from familiar, mainstream formats: they have the allure of *cinéma vérité* or contain filmic effects that approximate an altered state of mind. Moreover, they acknowledge subtle barriers to access – how for McArthur and Zavitsanos, for instance, the act of wrapping their arms around each other is not necessarily synonymous with a hug, but with a gesture of physical assistance. Increasingly, and especially after successive lockdowns, screens have come to replace physical encounters; they have become a widespread means by which to engage with intimate connections. Such mediation, however, does not yield true intimacy. 'Closer' reminds us that the medium of film, along with our digital devices and social media, tend to instrumentalise the personal narratives they disseminate. Once public, such narratives become political.

Main image: 'Closer', 2022, exhibition view, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Dusseldorf. Courtesy: the artists and Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Dusseldorf; photo: Cedric Mussano

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