

# F A / R

## FEMME ART REVIEW

### THE AFFECT OF SOCIAL INTIMACY: MÉLANIE MATRANGA'S 0,1,2,3,4

Mélanie Matranga's 0, 1, 2, 3, 4

Nottingham Contemporary

Saturday, 22 May 2021 – Sunday, 31 October 2021



Mélanie Matranga, *0, 1, 2, 3, 4* Nottingham Contemporary, 2021. Installation shots, Stuart Whipps.

By Sophia Arnold

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler explores the notion that surviving in the contemporary world is only possible due to the “social network of hands”[1] that supports, raises, and recognizes life, and in the current Coronavirus pandemic, it has never been more clear that this is the case. Mélanie Matranga’s exhibition *0, 1, 2, 3, 4* at the Nottingham Contemporary, her first solo show in the UK, is a stark reminder of Butler’s sentiment and an enriching break from the daily broadcasts of impersonal, popular jargon of the global economic instability caused by the pandemic.[2] Highlighting, both explicitly and tacitly, how care, community, and intimacy are essential in our daily lives, the exhibition evocatively invites the viewer to reflect on personal and societal pre-pandemic connection and speculate what our lives may look like post-pandemic, after the immense loss and instability of the past year and a half.

The sensuality, companionship, care, and connection that is omnipresent throughout the exhibition, yet simultaneously eerily absent depending on the room you are in, is the embodiment of the pandemic; it evokes what we, on an individual and societal level, have been deprived of in the name of safety and the effects of isolation. After a year of virtual exhibitions, Matranga’s exhibition was the first I had seen in person for what felt like a lifetime. Moreover, in conjunction with this already amplified initial viewing experience, I am writing and ruminating on my multiple ensuing visits to the exhibition while isolated in Canada’s legal hotel quarantine requirement, therefore heightening its impact. Curated by Olivia Aherne, the show is resoundingly pertinent at this moment; an effigy to all that has been lost since the early months of 2020.[3]



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When first entering Matranga’s exhibition, you are welcomed into a model of the Nottingham Contemporary’s office kitchen, adorned with fruit and flowers that will slowly rot away until the end of the exhibition’s installation.[4] This materiality embodies one of Matranga’s main ideals for an exhibition: “to try to escape the notion of artworks as dead things in the exhibition”[5] in an almost ironic way, as the installation wilts with the passing of time. The kitchen itself, dimly lit and with an ambiance of abandonment, conceals a miniature replica of the artist’s own living space within one of the tenebrous cupboards.

Matranga's use of scale and temporality, suggests an almost heterotopia through the layered, juxtaposing environments, linked through their jarring absence of the human presence that would usually embody the spaces. This austere atmosphere is only heightened by the security guard sitting at behind you, waiting to ID you before entering the next room.



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After proving to the guard that you are 18 years or older, visitors are guided through a door to a lightless room, with four socially distanced seats, to view Matranga's video work, *People* (2021). The 25-minute black and white film, separated into parallel and conjoining storylines by the classic film countdown numbers, enters you in the minutiae of individual universes, exploring the social relationality of different couples and groups.[6] An illusion of historicity, created by the old-fashioned aesthetics, undulates throughout the film with stark reminders of the present social dynamics and almost prophetic scenes, of what friendships and communities could become, breaking through the aesthetics of the staged time period.

The video work's storyline seemingly jumps between different character's environments and the complex interactions that take place inside them, despite the work being filmed in the artist's apartment.[7] As Jon Day notes in *Homing*, "homes... provide the still, stable point around which our thoughts and lives orbit. But they are also thresholds: places we must depart from before we can fully understand what they mean." [8] The minutiae of conversation explored in *People* wordlessly articulates how our homes have changed over the past year, from spaces of sociability to isolation and loneliness, and the running thread through the exhibition, of the eerie emptiness we have experienced during the pandemic, is once again brought to mind now that we have temporally crossed the 'threshold' from the pre-pandemic life portrayed in the video. From social gatherings in Matranga's apartment to tarot card readings, to couples engaging in a multitude of sexual activities, to intimate confessions and reflection, the viewer is pulled into the characters' world and home, whether that be a person or a place.

The shattering moment in *People* happens is when one of the characters starts to display symptoms of the virus that we have become all too familiar with, and the insular bubble the visitors are lulled into by watching the characters in the video, safe from the world of COVID outside of the museum space, immediately breaks. At this moment, I couldn't help but call to mind what Achille Mbembe called "the hour of autophagy."<sup>[9]</sup> We have been sheltered from death, but the pandemic has brought a global reckoning, an explosive reality-check for those who have been 'business as usual' for decades. This was also brought starkly into mind when I revisited the exhibition a month later and all of the aforementioned kitchen flora was wilting down to their final moments, reminding us not only of the pandemic's egregious, awful consequences but also of the intrinsic tie between nature and people that has become a recurring theme as we battle the climate crisis.



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When entering the third and final last room of Matranga's exhibition, the visitor enters a kind of effigy to this binaristic nature/human rhetoric: harsh plastic covers hanging from the ceiling with more decaying roses scattered on top, plastic-wrapped clothes, and mattresses as an installation in the center of the room, with more flowers under the plastic. It almost reflects the separation of humanity from the natural environment, as if we are outside of the decay and we can contain the spread of contamination. Yet at the same time, the bagged clothes and mattress, with cut-out felt the word 'COME' under the plastic in the center of the installation, could be a re-enactment of a crime scene, a liminal space, so silent, still, and sterile.

However touching this work is for myself and potentially a large percentage of the population, it is hard to ignore the fact that the artist's experience, portrayed specifically in *People*, inside a large Parisian apartment, is not the reality for those that Butler has described as 'transient,' debilitated and precarious before the pandemic began, with the pandemic only exacerbating the inequality and ostracization of certain societal groups.[10] Matranga captures a moment of upheaval and dissociation in a very postmodern way of individual storytelling and unique experiences. However, with a pandemic that is universal, affecting every being on this planet, and yet the burden of which is not universally felt, the video work remains within a specific socio-political reach.



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Despite the above, the slow ease of restrictions, the entire process of being able to go to a museum after months of restrictions, and the immense changes we have seen in the past year and a half, is paralleled by the installation of Matranga's work; the trough to the peak of normality, sociability and loneliness, all separate affective curves the visitor is travelling through, intertwining in an almost emotional rendition of the government statistic graphs presented to us every day on the news. In contrast to the art that has been created during the pandemic that asked what it means to be alone, this exhibition asks what it means to be together, navigating 'unprecedented' times through affect; an urgent question that opposes the cold spirit of economic jargon.

As a closing reflection, I was completely overwhelmed with how this exhibition, in the short space of a two-hour visit, helped me understand and retrospectively reflect on how the extended, slow, enduring, measures taken over the past year and a half immensely affected myself and my community. I left empty, deflated, heartbroken, for all those who have been lost to the virus and all the connections severed the chances that were lost for interpersonal and societal care indue to the pandemic, but also optimistic that one day we could return and understand the importance of sentiment and the community that raises, cares, and shelters us. Now that we have crossed the “threshold” from our pre-pandemic experiences of home and community, and soon have the ability to create the infamous ‘new normal,’ Mélanie Matranga’s exhibition 0,1,2,3,4 provides a pertinent frame of reflection for an individual’s “social network of hands.”[11]

[1] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (repr., London: Verso, 2016), 14.

[2] “Mélanie Matranga: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4”, Nottinghamcontemporary.org, 2021, <https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/whats-on/melanie-matranga/>.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen, “Melanie Matranga”, *Kaleidoscope*, 2018.

[6] Ibid.

[7] “Mélanie Matranga: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4”, Nottinghamcontemporary.org, 2021, <https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/whats-on/melanie-matranga/>.

[8] Jon Day, *Homing: On Pigeons, Dwellings and Why We Return* (London: John Murray Press, 2019).

[9] Achille Mbembe, translated by Carolyn Shread, “The Universal Right to Breathe”, *Critical Inquiry*, 2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/>.

[10] Judith Butler, “Capitalism has its Limits,” Blog, Verso Books, 2020, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>.

[11] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (repr., London: Verso, 2016), 14.