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A Proxy for a Thousand Eyes

Cherine Fahd

Curator's Essay

29 Nov



Cherine Fahd, *A Proxy for a Thousand Eyes* (2020), performance still.
Image courtesy the artist. Image: Pamela Pirovic.

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Artist Biography

Cherine Fahd

b. 1974, Sydney, Australia.

Lives and works in Sydney, Australia

Working across photography and video performance, Cherine Fahd explores the potential of photography as a social practice to build connections between people. Her recent exhibition projects include *Archie Plus*, Art Gallery of New South Wales (2020), *The National 2019: New Australian Art*, Carriageworks (2019), *On Vulnerability & Doubt*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (2019) and *Apókryphos*, Centre for Contemporary Photography (2019). Fahd has had two books published of her work by M.33 Melbourne, *A Portrait is a Puzzle* (2017) and *Apókryphos* (2019) which won the Australia New Zealand Photobook Award. Her writing has been published on The Conversation, ABC News and SBS and academic journals. She is currently the Director of Photography at UTS and an artist in residence at The Clothing Store at Carriageworks, Sydney.

Dedicated to a Better Year

Over the past year, time has felt distorted. Months have blurred together while we have grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic. As populations have shielded themselves from one other, legions of people globally have been deprived of touch, the steadfast language of human connection. This instinctive human urge, to hold, to press, to feel and to be felt has been replaced with fear, isolation, and loneliness. Seemingly for many during this ordeal, solitude was the best we hoped for, yet isolation was what we actually felt.

This experience was particularly acute for families with elderly loved ones living in aged care, regular focal points of COVID outbreaks in Australia and abroad. Often living with compromised and vulnerable immune systems, these elderly loved ones were precariously quarantined from the world. In an attempt for normalcy and connection, families met and communicated through glass windows and doors; separated but together. Heavily circulated images of these tender acts eventually saturated the global consciousness, capturing the grief, delirium, and desperation of social relations amid a public health emergency.

Observing these soft, sad images, Australian artist Cherine Fahd over the past four months, has sharpened and whittled down these anxieties, shaping them with her own research and recollections into a pinnacle. The result is *A Proxy for A Thousand Eyes*. Commissioned as part of Sydney Opera House's Art Assembly, the participatory performance ruminates on touch, intimacy, and loneliness by inviting members of the public to view and participate in a series of loosely choreographed interactions with Fahd in the Opera House's Utzon Room. Focusing on the window frames as both a barrier and connector, Fahd has reimagined them into the catalyst for the performance — as portals that focus our attention. Standing on either side of these framed plastic membranes, each of the forty participants is asked to mirror the artist's gestures in an act that echoes those family members searching for connection.

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In these silent exchanges lasting three minutes, the body's senses are haptically brought forward as the artist and performer explore the membranes expanse in unison. As part of an unspoken contract, these encounters enable both parties to focus themselves on touch — conjuring a therapeutic sense of wholeness that aims to repair and rebind the fissures, incoherence and disconnection that have defined the year. As the pandemic has left us bereft of adequate language to express our experience — with words few and far between — the borders of skin and cartilage between Fahd and the performer become a third language that animates where the tongue falters; enabling them to articulate the human experience in an altogether different way.

While the focus on event and audience are new developments in Fahd's practice specific to *A Proxy for A Thousand Eyes*, these focuses are the logical extension of her decades long examination of portraiture, performativity, and representation. Within the architecture of this performance, a team of five videographers and photographers will capture the performance, eventually forming the basis of a moving image work that will be exhibited later. Their presence, moving fluidly as performers of a different sort, further extends Fahd's interest in the politics of looking and watching.

In devising this work, Fahd complicates and expands historical conceptions of portraiture. Traditionally, the role of the artist is one of observer. By participating in the performance, she is both the initiator of the project and the object of portrayal, reversing the classical perspective of the portrait making. This softening of artistic hierarchies extends to the chorus of participants who are empowered with the agency to present, dress, and represent themselves as they wish. By allowing participants to shape the performance in this way, Fahd situates portraiture as a form of dialogue, decentred from the single artist's vision, with each performance changing, oscillating between the artist, the audience, the camera, and the wider world. Through this open dialogue, Fahd locates a familiar dialect that fuses the gap between

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these strangers, threading their experiences together through performance, portraiture and looking.

While this moving image work is months away from completion and exhibition, and the true ongoing effects of the COVID-19 crisis are unknown, the performance provides an urgent and immediate reminder that even amid life's sharp disruptions — as the pandemic cuts away at the fabric of life and society — art can offer respite and comfort, even if momentarily. In normal times, the image, especially the depiction of the individual, bears witness to how humans have perceived themselves over the course of time. During this public health emergency, the image and portraiture plays an even greater role in investigating and documenting ourselves and the world around us. It offers fresh eyes that assist us to re-examine how we live, understand what makes a world recognisable, how it is inhabited and whether it is hospitable, and for whom. In speaking about this, Fahd recalls, “the camera can see into the unseen, reveal the hidden and make visible the invisible.”

Without erring into grandiosity, the core of the work lies in touch and connection – sensations that have we have been deprived of during the pandemic. While these actions seemingly weigh nothing and cost nothing, they can powerfully cohere strangers, lovers, families, and friends. Without them, society breaks down. As we have kept apart to keep each other safe, *A Proxy for a Thousand Eyes* offers a teachable moment about interconnectedness and the human spirit by creating something new from what is gone. Through the language of regeneration, performance and portraiture, the work reminds us of the belief in the necessity of stories, language, and connection for our survival. This is the role of art — in normality or crisis — its existence as a searchlight that casts itself outwards, bringing the world into sharper relief and proximity.

Micheal Do
Curator, Contemporary Art

A Proxy For A Thousand Eyes is a Sydney Opera House commission, supported by our family of Corporate Partners and Donors, as part of New Work Now.

Thank you to our project donors and ARROW for its support in securing philanthropic seed funding for Art Assembly.

The Sydney Opera House's Curator Contemporary Art is enabled by Cathy & Andrew Cameron AM.

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