

A photo like a new life

Sehnsucht - an artistic inquiry into the emotional state during Covid-19

by Andreas Robertz

The year 2020 - the year of the Covid-19 pandemic - was for most artists the most challenging year of their lives. They were unable to travel, to work, to perform, to play, to act, to rehearse, to collaborate, or to take part in any in-person exhibition or performance: in short, they were unable to make a living. Exhibitions and performances, carefully developed over the years, were cancelled overnight.

Although a lot of the Western countries provided government subsidies for artists, the money came often late, or with bureaucratic burdens and ridiculous demands, or simply it was not enough. Many got nothing at all, many got ill, and many were under the hundred thousands who died. The fear to get infected was very real and omnipresent.

Confined in their quarters one of the apparent activities for visual artists was going through their archives and refocus their work.

In the Fall 2020 Cologne based, internationally renowned photographer Hiro Matsuoka called upon a group of experimental photographers in order to initiate an online project. The artists dedicated their individual work that would address the emotional state of each one of them during the lockdown. He called it "Sehnsucht", a German word for an emotional state somewhere between desire, longing, and yearning.

I spoke with Hiro Matsuoka about the genesis of the project, and with one of the participating US artists, Juliana Gagné, about her process during her Covid-19 infection.

Andreas: Hiro, how many artists participated in your project?

Hiro: I first talked about my idea of the project with my galleries and a few artists working with alternative photography. They are my friends, so I was closely in touch with them in the beginning of the pandemic. In the end, we were nine of us, who have been working in the project since its birth.

Andreas: You wrote in your project description: „Sehnsucht“ is an art project to reflect on the state of mind of many people during the lockdown“. You talk about confusion, anxiety, and desire for normalcy as examples of these emotions. What was the response of your collaborators upon your invitation to share their work? Did they experience similar states?

Hiro: The responses came quickly and they were very positive. It was October 2020, as we were quite in the similar situations. We were all fully aware of the problems, but hadn't really found a solution yet at that point. So, the project gave us motivations, an occasion to think and keep working.

Juliana: I was in Barcelona in January 2020 for the International Experimental Photography Festival. And I met Hiro there and we chatted and we were really connected through our work and sharing different processes.

Hiro: When I met Juliana and saw her work in the exhibition, it reminded me of a print made from an old baldly archived color negative. On the next day, she showed me a jar filled with some yellow liquid with a 35mm film in

it. Quite a shocking but also an interesting experience for me. After the festival, we kept in touch and I learned more about her work, which I really liked.

Andreas: Hiro, can you describe the curatorial process? Did you guide the process or was it a group effort?

Hiro: It was a mixture of both. After the first six months of pandemic, I had a clear idea how the project should look like. But, through the communication with the artists who had many ideas and suggestions, the project has been developed into what it is now.

Juliana: I was really quite pleased to be asked by Hiro to be in the exhibition. And it was really nice for me cause it was an individual project I was working on and I was in correspondence with Hiro through email. And so, I had this tethered to reality while I was working on the project, and I might send Hiro some photos and then I would decide not to include those photos later. So he was a little bit aware of the process.

Some of the people in the show I've met before at this photo exhibition that we were all part of in Barcelona, but most of the people I've never met before and I didn't know their work. And so it was really exciting sort of at the end, like once I was done with my part of the project to see the larger project was really interesting,

Andreas: Hiro, can you talk about the overall situation of the artists collaborating with you? Did they get financial aid?

Hiro: The financial aspect was one of the important issues for the artists. Individually, we are in all different situations, but none of us could really survived so far without the grants from the government or other forms of financial aid.

Andreas: During the run of the pandemic has your normal process of creating your art changed?

Hiro: I cannot speak for the others, but I had to adjust my daily routines and studio settings completely during the pandemic, until today. I took it, though, as an occasion to try out something else. Something that I always wanted.

My work „Elf Tränen“ - *eleven tears* - is probably a typical example of such changes. I had an idea of printing a photographic image on the objects. I began this process, but then came the pandemic; and during the project, I wrote a short story to this series based on the thoughts I had.

Andreas: I loved your story. I felt it is very evocative and I was really happy that you decided to include the story in the exhibition. Juliana, you battled with Covid-19 a long time. I want to ask you a little bit more in detail about how you work and how your process changed during this time.

Juliana: Usually I create photos with the disposable camera and I view it as this world, in which I'm in control of. And so I can choose to damage it how I like. So typically I tint the camera with markers, and I might stab it to create light leaks in the photo, and then while I'm shooting the camera for instance if I'm at the beach, I'll go swimming with the camera. I'll take it in the saltwater with me and in the waves. And then once the camera is done, then I usually soak it again in what's called a film soup. So I'm taking like different chemicals, different liquids, detergents, spices, all sorts of things and submerging the camera in it. And then once that's done, I freeze the camera usually overnight sometimes for as long as a week and let it thaw before I take it to be developed.

Andreas: When I hear this I'm totally surprised that you can see a result. I mean, if you stab it and put it in the water and everything. You stab it with a knife?

Juliana: Yeah. So I'm stabbing the disposable camera. I don't want to stab it all the way through. Usually I just want to break the surface so that light can come in through the plastic.

Andreas: I see. And do you have specific recipes for specific effects?

Juliana: It's kind of been a learning process. I've been working with film soups for probably almost 10 years now and it's a lot of experimenting. Sometimes if you push it too far, of course, you get no usable images or if you don't push it far enough, then sometimes it will get color-corrected during the developing, so you don't even notice you did anything.

So over the years I've found that there is some rhyme or rhythm to the effects that the liquids create. But it's really interesting, especially when you mix them together, how the chemicals are affected. So even if I have an idea that like red wine might produce one effect, bleach might produce another, and I might have an idea about how they're combined, but it always comes out like very different from roll to roll.

Andreas: And then you freeze them, right?

Juliana: Yes, I really am interested in the idea of changes of state or changes of matter. So I really liked that, when I'm freezing the film, it's changing the water molecules, cause usually there's still liquid on it after it's film-souped and so then that liquid dries and freezes, and then the effect from thawing it. I feel the camera kind of goes through many deaths. Now every time I take a photo, it's kind of a mini death. And when the roll is finished, it's another death, but out of all these deaths there's this new life created and a new stage to the process.

Andreas: And the new life is actually the photo.

Juliana: Yeah.

Andreas: It's beautiful how you describe it. I was so surprised by the intensity of the colors.

Juliana: Yeah, I really love the very saturated colors and one of the things typically that freezing will do to the camera is, it will increase the saturation. It doesn't always happen, but typically I find, if I freeze it, it increases that saturation and it also has an effect on the focus of the camera. It creates this really interesting almost vignette effect, when it's a little bit blurry on the edges and kind of comes to focus at the center. And usually the longer I freeze it the stronger that vignette becomes. And so sometimes the whole photo becomes a bit more unfocused. I find it really stunning if it was like a rather simple photo to just have it totally abstracted.

Andreas: And do you then still remember what you actually had photographed?

Juliana: Sometimes it's a complete mystery and every once in a while, I might take a role too far and I get rid of a lot of the original motifs. But I don't feel like, you know, anything isn't necessarily lost, because I do feel the experience that you have while creating the photo is imprinted onto the film.

Andreas: So you were quarantined in your little room and created this alchemic process, how did you choose the material you actually contributed to the exhibition?

Juliana: I was shooting for a long time. I had several rolls of film, that I had been working on, and so it was at first just trying to figure out, which photos I liked aesthetically on one level and then which photos I thought sort of said more about my experience or could depict certain things visually.

One of the first elements I thought of was, I just spent weeks really staring out of one bedroom window or two bedroom windows and so, I thought it would be important to definitely start with that. And then originally I had a photo of a second bedroom window that ended the presentation. Then I swapped it out, but I thought it would be kind of fun to play with the idea of, when I go from one window to another, that's sort of a beginning and end of the series like, were all the photos in between a dream, were they an imagined journey, a real journey? Kind of playing with the idea of one person being stuck in this bedroom.

Andreas: I feel your work is very emotional. I want to ask you a little bit more about that. Was it planned that way or how do you try to translate what you experienced into your work?

Juliana: It was interesting because being sick with Corona and then the after effects really affected my lifestyle. And so that affected my photography also. It was kind of this interesting play in the beginning and seeing how it

changed it.

Typically before Corona, I'm a very active person. Before I got sick, I would walk all the time, I would go for hikes, and to me walking was a very important part of every day. And I lived in New York City for four years, so I walked everywhere. And so usually on my journeys, I would take a camera with me and sort of document the walk. So some photos I would take would be of one subject, like near my apartment or near my house. And I would like to see how, even though it was maybe the same image, it was changed every time it was film-souped.

This walk was a very integral part of the process. And so then after Corona, if I could walk at all, they're very short walks. I wasn't seeing too much. I was mainly confined to a bedroom. In my photos before Corona, I don't really have a presence in those photos. I never take self-portraits, really. It's always mostly landscapes or more abstracted things or sometimes portraits of other people, but really never myself. And so then I started to think much more about my body in relation to space, and the spaces that I was in, and my relationship with my body, and trying to document that more.

Andreas: Can you say more about this?

Juliana: Sure, so as you'll notice, like through the photos in the series, I'm represented in self portraits, but they're usually in shadows, the figure of myself in the shadow or the sort of presence of a person that's been there. So I have one photo and it's like footprints left in the sand kind of idea that there is a figure, but you're not seeing their physical body.

I liked that sort of play, because a lot of my photos are inspired by what's called the free soul state. My grandfather is Sámi, the indigenous group to Scandinavia, and they have this very old belief that there were six different dimensions and they believed that the Noaidi, who was basically the medicine man for each clan of Sámi, that they could enter this trance state.

That was called the free soul state. And so they believed once they're in the state, that they could leave their body and enter that free soul experience and that they could go in other animals, they could travel the world, they could see things into the future, and they could travel to these other dimensions.

I really liked the idea, that I'm accessing this free soul state to take the photos, this sort of meditative mindset and this sort of trance, the idea, that I'm kind of leaving my body while I'm taking these photos, So you might see the presence of a figure, but without seeing a physical person.

Andreas: That is so interesting. I like that you have a strong connection to that, because it's your own ancestry.

Juliana: It has a really big influence on my work. In some of the photos, especially in the more abstracted ones, sometimes I have had a hard time coming up with meaningful titles. So for a lot of the abstract ones they are words from North Sámi, the language that I've been trying to learn. And I'm trying to incorporate the language and the culture even more into my practice.

Andreas: I can see that you have a lot of freedom through that in how you create your work, because they're not really boundaries. You can see the color kind of continue outside of the photo.

Juliana: Yeah, exactly. I love that.

Andreas: Is there anything else you feel like you would like to share about the process or about your work?

Juliana: I think one of the aspects that was a fun experiment for me, I was using the film soups and having sort of this meaning behind the ingredients. So I was adding a lot of the medications and supplements I've been taking and sort of things that reminded me of coronavirus in quarantine. So I added hand sanitizers, soap, bleach, all these cleaning detergents. I wasn't really sure how good the results would be. It was really interesting for me to see the reaction of the medications, and many of the herbs I'm on left really interesting effects on it. It adds like another layer of meaning to what it was being souped in.

Andreas: Juliana and Hiro, thank you both so much.

Although I had the conversations separately, I brought them here together, as if we all were part of the same conversation. They both took place in April/May, 2021 and were lightly edited. For more information, please visit the official project website: sehnsuchtartproject.com

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