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Democracy Dies in Darkness

This video art show responds to the pandemic zeitgeist, but offers no escape

By **Kelsey Ables**

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Welcome to the umpteenth day of lockdown.

At first, the digital images we fed on were only meant to tide us over. We talked to screens like they were faces and inhabited Zoom grids like they were rooms.

Relieved to peer into another person's reality and certain this would pass, we played make-believe. Until, at some point, the images brought more dread than comfort, and started to feel less like windows and more like walls.

Part of "Focus Group II: Paratexts," an online exhibition of video art by Georgetown gallery Von Ammon Co., Tabor Robak's "Algos," doesn't offer an escape. A simulated roller coaster ride through bland domestic interiors, the work reads like a brutal portrait of our collective cabin fever. Through lifeless living rooms, empty hallways, generic bedrooms, the roller coaster hurtles forward, in a performance of progress that leads only to more of the same. Just as the track approaches a light-filled window, it plunges into a claustrophobic basement, as if to scream, "You're not going anywhere."

Rather than becoming a victim of our present predicament, Von Ammon Co. has responded to the stay-at-home order with an impromptu show that embraces work native to the screen.

In today's context, Catharine Czudej's "Siphon," a nonsensical YouTube tutorial about siphoning water from a river, seems to mock an Internet teeming with content by creators eager to make the most of your time in isolation. Darren Bader's "video file (BTD)," includes a CGI rendering of Elton John and Billy Joel performing on floating pianos, echoing the eerie placelessness of group live-streams and the apocalyptic energy of a concert with no attendees, shot from the inhuman perspective of a drone.

In a time when our world is increasingly governed by screens, some of the fault lines exposed by "Paratexts" feel a little too real. Just weeks ago, there was a comfortable distance between us and our theories about the treachery of images or the alienation of technology. Now, speculative fictions have landed in our living rooms. Your response to "Paratexts" will depend on both your patience for conceptual art and your emotional wherewithal.

These works might validate your unease. They might also exacerbate it.

In Parker Ito's "#6," an animated figure stands in front of a screen, staring at images of landscapes and mimicking dancers in music videos. Based on a mascot for a pest-extermination service, the top-hatted figure is an example of what the artist calls a "floating" image, one so ubiquitous that it has separated from whatever it once represented, freed to latch onto new associations. You have to wonder: Have we, too, become floating images? Zoom panels project our presence, but are we really there?

Our ability to share images once seemed like a modest triumph in a uniquely human quest to overcome the limitations of time and space. Now, by a twist of fate, we're so enmeshed in the physical world and its microbes that images are almost all we have. They get to travel. We do not.

Violet Dennison's "HIDE (Succession)" serves as a reminder that any perceived separation between us and the natural world is an illusion. As a robotic voice describes a pathogen overtaking humanity, bodies crowd into the Times Square subway station, shoulder-to-shoulder, waist-to-waist, in practically pornographic proximity.

Alex Bag also takes on this faulty logic, with a satirical documentary on the reproductive cycle of a lethal — and entirely fictional — creature called the Salmonellapod. Given our present circumstances, the belief that we are the ones who impose order on a chaotic natural world seems particularly absurd. If the ubiquitous floor markings spaced six feet apart suggest anything, it's that we're the ones who need to be domesticated.

True to the video medium, "Paratexts" is full of sudden shifts in tone and pacing. In one unexpected turn, Timur Si-Qin's "Campaign for a New Protocol" goes so far as to propose a new religion based on honoring our place in the physical world. While it echoes some ideas in Bag's satire, in the context of this show it's hard to gauge its sincerity. (It's not meant as a critique of New Age hoo-ha.) And while shorter films benefit from the attention this web presentation demands, longer works — particularly an untitled piece by Jacob Kasey that runs a mind-numbing 99 minutes — feel burdensome in a way they might not if encountered in a more casual setting.

Beth Collar's meditative, half-hour-long "Island of the Dead" is an exception. As the sun sets over water, a shadowy female figure points to a rock in the center of the frame. "That's where the dead go," she tells us. Her hand wavers, the rock comes in and out of focus. But still, she sounds so sure. Over and over she says, "That's where the dead go."

Now if only she could tell us where the living go.

Focus Group II: Paratexts

Von Ammon Co., vonammon.co/focusgroup2

Dates: Through June 30.

Admission: Free