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# Photographing Strangers: On Shai Ignatz's Affective Portraits

Shai Ignatz's portraits are created out of encounters with strangers. The artist posts a call in virtual space, usually in gay sites, offering to photograph individuals in their own domestic living environment, yet also asking their consent to display the photographs, without their names, in the public space, a gallery or a museum, in a future exhibition. This form of artistic practice turns the home into a photography studio, a protected setting delimited in time and space that guarantees anonymity but also allows for acquaintance and intimacy. Throughout these sessions, the studio/home becomes a theatrical stage, an inherently performative and playful realm for exhibiting and presenting different subjectivities and social roles. That is, out of these encounters photography becomes an *act*, an inherently dialogic form for self-fashioning, rather than a passive mode for "representing" pre-determined and fixed identities.

And here precisely lies the power of Ignatz's images, which while evoking the disciplinary historical function of the photographic portrait as a coercive means for identification and surveillance, also open the possibility to escape from the "normalizing" and regulating gaze towards a different economy, not only of power, but also of desire and pleasure. These portraits and video works are inherently *relational* because they register the intricate, complex



and constantly shifting exchange that is created between a photographer and a stranger as part of an emotional, psychological and corporeal encounter that affects both parties. Moreover, by photographing strangers inside their homes and presenting the resulting portraits in public, these works question notions of privacy and publicness that structure and mediate collective and individual life, in particular, the instantiation of intimacy as a power that both secures and unsettles these divisions.

## Sex in Public

Before the internet, cruising took place in actual, "real" space, the subject of Ignatz's first solo exhibition and book titled *Independence Park in the Morning* (2000–2003). Independence Park is located in central Tel Aviv, next to the beach and a children's playground. During the nineteenth century, the site served as a Muslim cemetery (the graves were removed in 1963 in order to make way for the construction of the Hilton hotel that is situated next to the beach), its first trees were planted in 1949 to mark Israel's first Independence Day, and it officially opened as a park in 1952. Yet in the following decades it suffered from neglect, and in the 1990s, when Ignatz photographed the series, it had become a gay cruising site. In recent years, as part of the intensive gentrification and urban renewal of metropolitan Tel Aviv, the park was redesigned as a place for leisure and sport activities.

Ignatz chooses to photograph in the park in the morning, after the sexual encounters that took place there during the night have ended. In this way, his work resists the voyeuristic, sensationalist and "anthropological" gaze often imposed on cruising sites by artists. His camera is focused not on specific acts, but on the park itself as a peculiar habitat that is simultaneously revealed as a closed, confining, somewhat claustrophobic territory, with its entangled, dense foliage, and a "liberated" protected zone, where normative codes of dress, propriety, and conduct are temporarily suspended. Vegetation screens and camouflages the human figures that suddenly appear from behind trees, among withered bushes, or in a clearing, and at the same time enables and accentuates the display of male faces, bodies, and sexual organs. The park is exposed as a site of wonder and curiosity

from soliciting participation and collaboration in actual sites to the internet, this in no way marks a shift from "real" space (and actual sexual acts) into a "virtual" one (and "cyber" sex). First, because the "real" sexual acts that take place in the park are not contrasted with "virtual" sex, rather both expose the phantasmic character of every form of affective and sexual relation between subjects where projections, fantasies, and fictive scenarios are integral if not crucial to the triggering of desire. Second, because the name Independence Park designates not only an actual location, but also a semi-separate or literally, an "independent" realm, what Michel Foucault defines as heterotopia, where "real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sort of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable."[1] Heterotopias exist in every culture or civilization as both mythical and actual spaces, sacred and profane, as partially "autonomous" zones where hegemonic forms of social affiliation and modes of subjectivization are temporarily suspended. Foucault actually describes the garden, along with the theater and cinema, as a specific kind of heterotopia that "has the ability to juxtapose in a single real space several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves."[2] In the same way that the theater and cinema project a succession of unrelated places into which the spectator, immobilized, sitting "fixed" in a dark hall, is imaginatively transposed, so too the garden, "the smallest parcel of the world and the whole world at the same time,"[3] and its varied vegetation, functions as a kind of microcosm of the universe. Photography can also be included in this list, as it combines the theatrical and cinematic and offers a similar imaginative charge between the "real" (so-called documentary or news photography) and the imaginary (staged in a studio). Indeed, a large part of Ignatz's work is dedicated to challenging these generic distinctions because the studio is always relocated into other spaces and becomes a performative arena for incompatible

1 Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 178.
2 Ibid., 181.
3 Ibid., 182.



rather than of deviation or promiscuity where Ignatz's camera turns even the smallest and most negligible dry weeds and shrubs into spectacular still-lifes; while dusty, mundane, domesticated tropical-looking cactuses photographed majestically against the blue sky or close to the ground are not only monumentalized, but also exoticized.

In this series, the park and its temporary inhabitants are unexpectedly encountered by Ignatz's camera and wandering gaze rather than collectively "classified" through familiar and established codes and conventions of representation. This is manifested most clearly in the emphasis on variety and heterogeneity, as men of different age, class, skin color, and ethnicity are photographed in a way that emphasizes their subjective singularity. Yet naked or half-naked male subjects are not caught (or "hunted") "off-guard" in a paparazzi-like manner, but once noticed, are intentionally and consciously addressed, invited or seduced to look directly at the camera or to turn their backs to it. The power of these portraits lies in their unresolved tension between sheer exhibitionism and withdrawal, and between corporeal and sexual assertiveness and extreme emotional vulnerability. The bodies and faces of these subjects who are versed in exposure and display as part of their solicitation of sexual encounter acquire a different presence, composure, and expression in front of the camera because of, among other reasons, the unknowability of the future addressees of the photographs. As if asking, who will look at my image? And for what purpose? Who am I when I am exhibiting my body in front of the camera of an artist rather than of a potential partner? The impossibility of fully predicting, for both the photographer and those photographed, the results and nature of an encounter with strangers, with their different and varying inclinations for enthrallment, motivates and underlies this series.

*Independence Park in the Morning* is a foundational series in Ignatz's oeuvre in the way it establishes early on a particular form of practice and artistic motivation. Within the history of Israeli photography, it is a groundbreaking series in the way it both addresses and represents issues of sexuality and homosexuality, in particular the way it brings to the fore the artist's specific relation to the communities he photographs. And while Ignatz will move

. . . is dispersed through incommensurate registers by definition *unrealizable* as community or identity."[4] I think this is a good description for what the series *Independence Park in the Morning* tries to do, as well as Ignatz's other artistic projects.

## Desire in the Museum

While *Independence Park in the Morning* alludes to sexual acts that take place in public space, the series and photo installation *Monsieur Léri* (2012) focuses on the way a public institution, a museum, becomes a stage for private acts of self-display. At the time this series was created, Mr. Léri was director of the Carnavalet Museum in Paris, which opened in 1880 and is dedicated to the city's history. It includes artifacts such as paintings, posters, photographs, engravings, sculptures, period furniture, as well as personal items of historical figures such as Napoléon's toiletry case and Émile Zola's gold watch.

Léri, a middle-aged man, is photographed in the different halls and rooms in the museum not as a "respectable" director wearing a suit and tie, but mostly in his white underwear and socks, lying in a seductive manner like an odalisque on regal sofas or standing in front of golden framed history paintings and oil portraits of female figures. This is an extraordinary series in which Léri seems to "act out" what looks like his most private sexual fantasies, posing half or completely naked in an assertive yet provocative manner in a space that is all about respectability, publicness, decorum, refinement, and taste. Mr. Léri is in fact *queering* the museum, turning it into a stage for performing different kinds of fantasies and desires than those museums usually offer to their visitors occupied as they are with propriety and cultural hierarchies. Museums also function as heterotopies where time accumulates indefinitely without supposedly being affected by erosion and change.

Léri's postures break the illusion of timelessness that historical museums like the Carnavalet imbue. His relentless posing and inventive corporeal arrangements in front of official records of

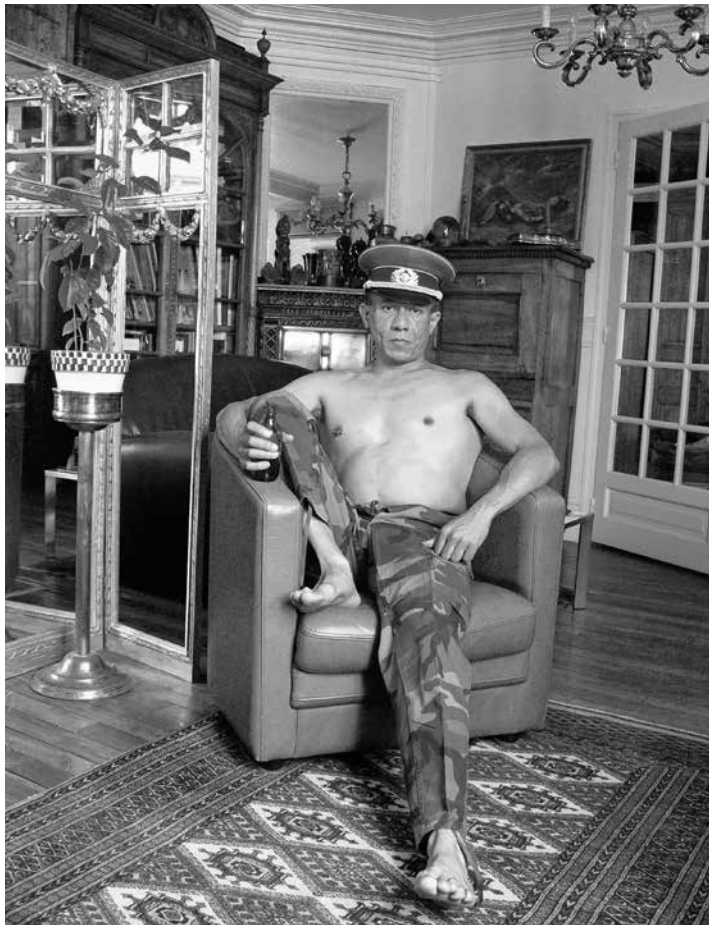
4 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 558 (emphasis in original).



registers of subjectivity rather than an "identity lineup."

Independence Parks are found in many cities in Israel, and the name also brings to mind "Independence Day" that exists in many countries as the day marking the end of a long process of decolonization and the official date for the formation of the nation-state. And since the state is often metaphorically and metonymically configured as a family, with the heterosexual couple as the privileged, exclusive model for social and civic normativity, Ignatz's series, by focusing on a cruising site in which sex is performed in public, unsettles not only norms of social conduct, but also the divisions underlying and delimiting the public sphere. "Sex in Public" is the title of a foundational text by queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner that was published in 1998 just a few years before the creation of *Independence Park in the Morning*. This text traces and challenges the historical trajectory through which private domestic life became separated from public and political life by turning sexuality into a property of subjective and individual experience, the essence of a person's identity and biography. This explains why sexual acts are understood to be the most intimate and private form of communication whose display in public is stigmatized or prohibited. However, the privatization of sex and the sexualization of private personhood obscure not only the way people actually live and the conditioning of their private experiences by economic and political systems, but also the way public institutions, whose aim it is to guarantee the reproduction of social life, mediate relations of intimacy. These institutions, like the family and nation-state, but also different cultural forms and mediums (such as movies, books, TV), produce and are produced by hierarchies and privileges that make heterosexuality normative. Thus, queer theory, and culture's main project, is to "make sex public" by pointing out not only how sexuality is mediated and constructed by different public institutions, but also how heteronormativity fails to account for the variety and richness of intimate lives as practiced and performed by subjects. The queer world, argue Berlant and Warner, "is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. World making

A



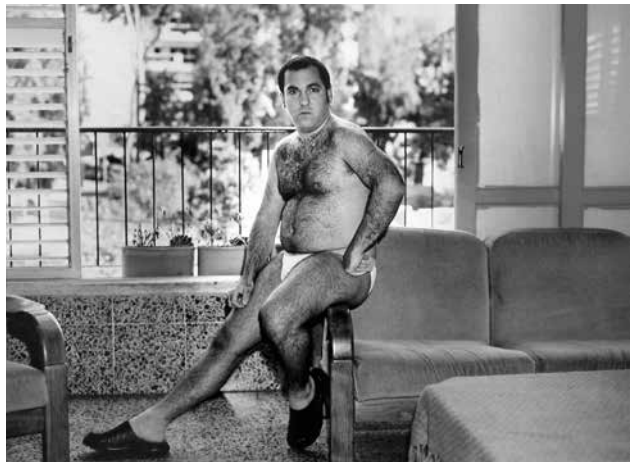
B



regality and governance insert spontaneity, contingency, and a sense of "presentness" into objects that are presented like fossils. It is almost as if his exhibitory performances enliven the museum, making it a much more secular, ordinary place where, rather than frozen, life unfolds. His often comic poses deflate the pompousness and pathos of the museum's displays, turning the site from a mausoleum and temple into a strip club. Thus, like in *Independence Park in the Morning*, this series challenges the underlying divisions organizing social space once private acts usually confined to the bedroom or to specific sexual-exchange and exhibitory venues are not only photographed and displayed in public, but also staged at a public institution. At the same time, these acts expose the strange fact that quite often in historical museums the most valued and popular items are intimate and personal ones of famous public figures, items that relate precisely to the body, like jewelry or a bed. This suggests that sexuality is not excluded from the public realm, but is repressed or "objectified" into material fetishes. In contrast, Léri's nakedness insists on inserting the bodily, the sensual and sexual into idealized and disembodied representations of individuals. However, he is also often photographed expressionless in front of official portraits as if mimicking or repeating particular iconographical gestures and postures from the history of art (hands folded, head bent or turned to the side, body erect or reclining). This form of repetition ends up "queering" the subjects depicted, subverting precisely the idea that a portrait distills and consolidates a person's identity into some sort of an "essence" of private interiority. Instead, Léri's poses expose the performative and staged as integral to any sense of selfhood, thus revealing portraiture to be an art of make-believe, of masquerade, and of what looks like a private display, but that is nevertheless always oriented towards an actual or imaginary audience.

In the installation *Monsieur Léri*, photographs of Léri in the museum are juxtaposed with head portraits that mimic police mug shots: the head is seen from the shoulders up, in side and frontal views. This constellation of portraits mobilizes different conventions pertaining to the history of photography evoking Allan Sekula's famous argument in his canonical essay "The

C



D

E



Body and the Archive" of a generalized, inclusive photo archive, a "shadow archive" where "every portrait implicitly took its place within a social and moral hierarchy. The *private* moment of sentimental individuation, the look at the frozen gaze-of-the-loved-one, was shadowed by two other more *public* looks: a look up, at one's 'betters,' and a look down at one's 'inferiors.'"[5] This suggests that every photographic portrait, whether meant for private or public use, is always a coercive means of subjectivization and interpellation. Yet in Ignatz's work, photographs are made in a *collaborative* manner through which both the photographer and the individuals photographed occupy complex and conflicted positions within specific social orders and milieus. Thus, Léri is photographed in not only multiple scenarios, but also exhibiting multiple subjectivities and social roles: the official director of the museum and a private individual, a seductive sexual object submitting himself to a voyeuristic gaze and a (male) subject strongly asserting his individual homoerotic class tastes and preferences.

Rather than inviting individuals to a professional studio, in his practice Ignatz is traveling to a stranger's home enabling comfort and intimacy, but also registering the tensions, inhibitions, desires, and conflictual aspirations that underlie the actual process of making portraits from both sides of the camera. There are subjects who address the camera as a screen on which they can project their fantasies, posing as someone else or as occupying a different social role than in their actual lives. Consider, for example, Untitled (Warsaw, 2008) (Fig. A), where a man is photographed wearing a military uniform and black boots, his body stiff and at full attention as if participating in a military parade and responding to an external order. The visual split between his "official" rigid posture and dress and the modest and rather bare domestic surroundings with the IKEA furniture exposes his pose as role-playing. Subjects sometimes choose to wear costumes and accessories identifying them as engaged in a particular sexual practice (BDSM) and role (passive or active), as in

5 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 347 (emphasis in original).

Untitled (Black Mask, Paris, 2006) (Fig. B) and Untitled (Uniform, Paris, 2006) (Fig. C). In the former image, a man wearing a BDSM outfit is seen sitting erect, his muscular white chest radiating light, looking directly at the camera. Behind him is a white piano and on the wall hangs a colorful, Expressionist-like painting of two female nudes, and on an adjacent wall a still life painting of yellow flowers in a vase and underneath it a narrow, transparent shelf on which are placed real yellow flowers. This portrait — set as it is in a bourgeois-looking apartment that conveys conformity and cultural refinement — challenges the spectator's expectations and presumptions, thereby refusing to align sexual preferences with predesignated sites and socially marginalized identities. These are not portraits of "types" as surprising juxtapositions created in the domestic setting, registering subjectivity as not only layered and complex, but also as an inherently unresolved and unfinished performative process.

In Ignatz's work, sex is performed in public, while varied sexual acts of role-playing form a part of a living, everyday environment. At the same time, the home is revealed to contain its own visual and aesthetic pleasures, becoming a gallery of sorts in which a play of deceiving reflections and appearances is carried out, and in which nakedness is presented as inseparable from the long art historical tradition of the nude. This genre is also evoked in Untitled (Olivier, 2007) (Fig. E), in which Olivier, seen lying naked on a brown velvety-looking sofa next to rumpled, reddish decorative pillows, his hands resting on his splayed thighs as if encircling his penis, looks intensely at the camera. His gaze, together with his relaxed and assured pose directing the viewer's gaze to his sexual organ and pubic hair, imbue the genre of the nude with sensuality and sexuality and expose its main repressed function throughout history: to arouse sexual desire. Yet sometimes, for example in Untitled (Ramat Gan, 2004) (Fig. D), nakedness exposes a contingent mixture of both undecidedness and confidence, an unresolved tension between asserting one's non-normative preferences and "blending" into the most familiar and mundane, in this case, the typical mass-fabricated architectural and design elements of a middle-class Israeli apartment.



It is not because subjects are photographed at home that they act "freely," but because they are photographed there, the home is revealed as a "private" arena for self-fashioning. Yet, it is one that is always shaped and responds to both the actual presence and the gaze of the photographer, and similarly to *Monsieur Léri*, to an unknown public or "counterpublic" that is configured as both a real and potential addressee.[6]

## The Intimate Art of Failure

Ignatz refrains from naming the subjects of his portraits, thereby securing their anonymity, but also, again refusing to equate and reduce a person's life or biography to a singular image. This nonetheless happens in the works of the greatest masters of photography, for example Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus, in whose photographs titles tend to be both descriptive and evaluative, informing the viewer what is the status, profession, or mental state of the photographed subject as a way to emphasize the "determining" traits of a specific personality, even when these cannot actually be seen in the photographs. Contemporary photographers, such as Jess T. Dugan and Deana Lawson, who create portraits of gender non-conforming subjects and African-Americans, respectively, title them only with first names, refusing genealogical linkage and any kind of leading information, or with allegorical and mythological ones in the case of Lawson.

Yet first names do appear in Ignatz's oeuvre, in the titles of his exhibitions and photo installations, such as *Michael* (2005), *Shaul* (2015), and *Jo* (2021), and as titles of his video works. These names refer to specific individuals, but it is as if the breadth of an exhibition or the length of a video allows for a different kind of spectatorial engagement than a single image. With the video works, Ignatz's artistic focus has shifted from the creation of portraits to documentation of the photographic session itself, during which photographs are taken and the click of the still camera is constantly heard, but in most cases it is the video itself that is the final artistic product rather than the series of

6 On the difference between a public and a counterpublic, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

photographs. These videos expose the discomfort, awkwardness, and often, embarrassment that accompanies these sessions, and the emotionally and physically hard labor of photographing strangers. The photographic session is revealed to be an arena in which a double and cyclic movement unfolds between incitement and coercion, pleasure and power, capture and mutual seduction. What Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality* regarding the religious and medical institution of the confession as a relation of "physical proximity and an interplay of intense sensations," in which pleasure comes from "exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting."[7]

While photography, film, and video are often associated with distance and abstraction, with power relations that somehow always work to the benefit of the artist and photographer, Ignatz's videos expose a much more complex "confessional" dynamic, precisely as Foucault suggests. These works renounce distance and are infused with touch and proximity as bodies are encountered in the most intimate of spaces: the bedroom. Consider *Philip* (2016), where the video camera is situated stationary at the edge of Philip's bed and he is filmed from the back, sitting in front of a huge, green houseplant and large window with shades. The short video begins with Ignatz entering the frame and standing above Philip with his camera, but he immediately sits down next to him on the bed and turns Philip's face, head, chin, and shoulder towards the light coming from the window and the camera in order to insure the quality of a "good" portrait. In the video, these minor, gentle gestures, when filmed from the back, are seen as if soliciting acknowledgment and recognition of Ignatz's own presence and not just of the camera. As if the touch and physical proximity are meant to calm Philip's obvious nervousness and stiffness and

7 Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 45.



ease the tension underlying this encounter. They seem almost therapeutic in nature rather than functional and professional. An even closer bodily contact between photographer and subject occurs in *Didier* (2021). The video starts with an extreme close up of what turns out to be Ignatz's shirt filmed from the back, and as he moves, Didier's face, his eyes blinking from the strong light that comes from an unseen window, comes into focus. The more the photographer recedes to the edge of the frame the more is revealed of the subject's bare body and the fact that both are lying on a bed very close to each other in an extremely narrow and disorienting space. Like in *Philip*, Ignatz is adjusting and shifting Didier's body, and while doing so, his own reflection holding the still camera is reflected in a mirror situated behind the bed on a closet door. The outcome of this visual arrangement is a sort of "double portrait" of the photographer and the subject who are both "framed" through the video camera that is also momentarily seen in the mirror. This familiar art historical reflexive scene of the "artist's studio," almost always of a male artist painting his female model, is significantly reconsidered once the studio is located in the bedroom, the subjects are both male, and the erotically and emotionally charged encounter between them is emphasized and acknowledged rather than overlooked or repressed.

Filmic and video portraits of individuals became prevalent in contemporary art since Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*, in works by Fiona Tan, Rineke Dijkstra, Douglas Gordon, and Philippe Parreno. Yet, what distinguishes Ignatz's work is his interest in the relations that are triggered and created in the photographic session, even in cases when he is only briefly seen, often as a fleeting reflection on a glass surface, like a window. The main subject of these works, I think, is intimacy as an unsettled desire. In *Aurélien* (2015), for example, Aurélien is seen first from afar wearing a dark suit, on a crowded Parisian street, and then it cuts to his studio apartment where the bed is located close to a desk and office chair and a range of mainly architectural drawings hang on the wall. After a few seconds, he enters the room and, following some preliminary arrangements in which both Ignatz and Aurélien seem extremely nervous, he is seen sitting on a chair, clearly unsatisfied, and voices his feelings: "I can't be comfortable with this machine, and this

is not my best tie." Yet even after changing to his best tie, he is still visibly ill at ease, explaining that it is more difficult than he thought when he agreed to be photographed because of "the idea that someone will use machines, picture-machines, to watch me." It becomes unclear whether Ignatz's presence in the apartment or the still and video cameras is the source of his discomfort: "You are here. The most difficult for me was to accept, to show you my flat [...]. It will be easier for me to be naked in front of you now than to receive you in my second skin, which is my flat because all parts of the flat is me." He is next seen posing for the still camera in his suit, standing next to his bed; then sitting stiffly on a leather sofa as if modeling for an official business portrait. His head constantly turns to the side, and his gaze nervously shifts from addressing the stationary video camera in front of him to the still camera held by Ignatz and then to his apartment. These shifts in address register a tension between Aurélien's response to the enforced intimacy that Ignatz's embodied presence in his private apartment has created and to all the strangers who will see his portrait in the future in a public space. It seems that allowing someone to enter his apartment is much more disturbing for him than to appear in public, because in the public realm Aurélien knows what is expected of him. He knows how to behave or pose in a manner that exposes nothing of his personal life, whereas sharing, even momentarily, his living space with a stranger turns out, surprisingly, to be quite unbearable, like a forced confession.

And this is precisely what makes intimacy such a socially explosive and charged term. As Berlant argues, intimacy involves an aspiration for a story in which things will turn out in a particular way by creating and assuring oneself of zones of familiarity such as friendship and social affiliation. Nevertheless, in its instantiation as a desire or wish, it also turns out to be a *destabilizing* force that "creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation. Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress 'a life' seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability."[8] As a constantly mobile process of affective

8 Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 282.



attachment, intimacy is unpredictable and untamed: it can appear in unwarranted sites such as work places (in the case of sexual harassment) or disappear from places where one expects it the most, like the home (where domestic violence and abuse can prevail). Thus as Berlant emphasizes, "The kinds of connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for living . . . do not always respect the predictable forms."[9] This suggests, again, that institutionalized forms of intimacy like the married couple, the family and the home, cannot necessarily fulfil the wish for security and protection or account for the range of unexpected sites, practices, encounters, and gestures in which intimacy can emerge.

Yet, in Ignatz's videos, this potential failure can become an art, a productive queer site for invention and creativity, a way of life that resists neoliberal protocols of success and heteronormative codes of conformity and social assimilation.[10] Some of his video's subjects rejoice and are truly enthusiastic about the opportunity to let a stranger into their private space and perform multiple roles and identities in front of his camera rather than fear exposing their "true" self. Consider *Manfred* (2021), the most spectacular and engaging subject of Ignatz's work. A middle-aged man with a long, carefully trimmed beard, he is noticeably at ease in front of the still camera and almost oblivious to the presence of the video camera. Concentrating on the still camera, he poses confidently in different outfits while adjusting his posture, and clearly enjoying this mode of role-playing and the change of identities, constantly mumbles "yeah," and "you like this." At a certain point in the session, while wearing a black leather vest, very tight exercise shorts, and a cowboy hat, he states that "this is what I wear while I have sex," as if clarifying that role playing is integral to his sexual practice, hence the ease in modeling and pleasure of being subjected to the camera. This becomes clear when the session moves to his bedroom where BDSM equipment is seen, and suddenly all the formal costumes he was seen wearing earlier such as a black

9 Ibid., 284 (emphasis in original).

10 On failure as a productive site of resistance, see Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

next to a bed they share. In *Jo*, the lover becomes a stranger, while the artist and the engaging possibilities he offers for display create bodily proximity and familiarity as part of a collaborative effort at self-fashioning.

Trying hard to conform, to succeed, to present oneself in the best possible way, to adhere to social protocols and rituals — these impulses are revealed to be unavoidable when subjectivity, and a sense of private, protected interiority can only be procured by addressing oneself to an imaginary or real public. Yet this effort always ultimately *fails*, not because of individual deficiency or incapacity, but because public norms are inherently too limiting and confined to account for the richness and variety of actual modes of living. And contrary to neoliberal rationality that only acknowledges "winners" and "losers," failure, as Ignatz's works clearly show, can become a productive mechanism for resisting heteronormativity, where power and pleasure, seduction and coercion, incitement and prohibition, circulate, relay, and mediate complex forms of affective attachment. For this to happen, both cynicism and naïve optimism must be avoided and in their stead relentless care, empathy, solidarity, and subtlety desired — precisely the underlying qualities of Shai Ignatz's art.



tuxedo and top hat and a NYPD shirt acquire a subversive sense. Manfred is actually "acting out" disciplinary social roles as part of a homosexual fantasy in which hyper masculinity with its stress on control is simultaneously enforced and ridiculed once it is divorced from heteronormativity. The bedroom also becomes the site for changing roles where, instead of the photographer giving orders and adjusting the subject's body, Manfred begins to shift Ignatz's body and the position of the camera, taking full control of the session.

The pleasure of posing is also made evident in one of Ignatz's most moving videos *Jo* (2021). Jo is Jo Gostin who is not a stranger but a friend with whom Ignatz collaborated a decade ago on a joint project while she was the president of WIZO Melbourne, Australia. Jo commissioned Ignatz to photograph members of WIZO while they convened for their annual meeting, and the project resulted in an exhibition and book. The session takes place in a hotel room during one of Jo's visits to Tel Aviv. In the first scene, she is seen, tanned with white hair, against a sunny balcony, in a bra and panties while she puts on a black dress. The video camera follows her from behind as she combs her hair until she turns to the camera as if welcoming it. She is next seen sitting on the bed, assured and comfortable, while Ignatz takes still photos of her until she demands to see the results of his labor, and he joins her on the bed, showing her the images in his camera. There is a sense of familiarity and closeness between the two that is manifested in the ease with which Jo undresses in front of the photographer and the video camera, when she tries on another outfit, asks him to zip and unzip her dress, or changes into a bathing suit. Suddenly a man is seen entering the room. Is he Jo's lover or partner? This is not clear, but he obviously shares the hotel room with her. His unexpected appearance is felt as intrusive, and the verbal communication between him and Jo is awkward and abrupt. This, again, is the strangest thing about intimacy that Ignatz's work exposes in such an admirable and sensitive way: it emerges in the most unexpected sites like a hotel room, where a young man takes photos of an older woman to be presented publically; and vanishes from where you most expect it — in an encounter between a woman and her sexual partner