

Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life* (detail) (video still) (2021).  
Six-channel 2K video with sound, 19 minutes.  
© Sara Cwynar. Image courtesy of the artist;  
The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto;  
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# Sara Cwynar and the Texture of Digital Pictures

I read critic Lucy Sante's stunning essay for *Vanity Fair*, "On Becoming Lucy Sante," from bed one morning this January, my phone's brightness turned down as my eyes acclimated to the light. In it, Sante, who came out as transgender in 2021 at age 67, recalls her discovery of FaceApp's gender-swapping filter, through which she subsequently fed "every image of myself I possessed, beginning at about age 12." She writes: "The effect was seismic. I could now see, laid out before me on my screen, the panorama of my life as a girl, from giggling preteen to last year's matron."<sup>1</sup>

Though only a small part of the brave and elegant text, I've returned to this passage many times. It cracked something within me. By design, programs like FaceApp propagate an impossible and flat, hetero-patriarchal image of beauty, and imagining its use to quite opposite ends felt revelatory. It was also a profound reminder of the ways that our digital experiences are inextricably intertwined with, and not secondary to, our real lives. Sante's experience insists upon photography's capacity to *do* things, to affect our spirits and bodies in the physical world—a rich possibility given the insidious nature of the

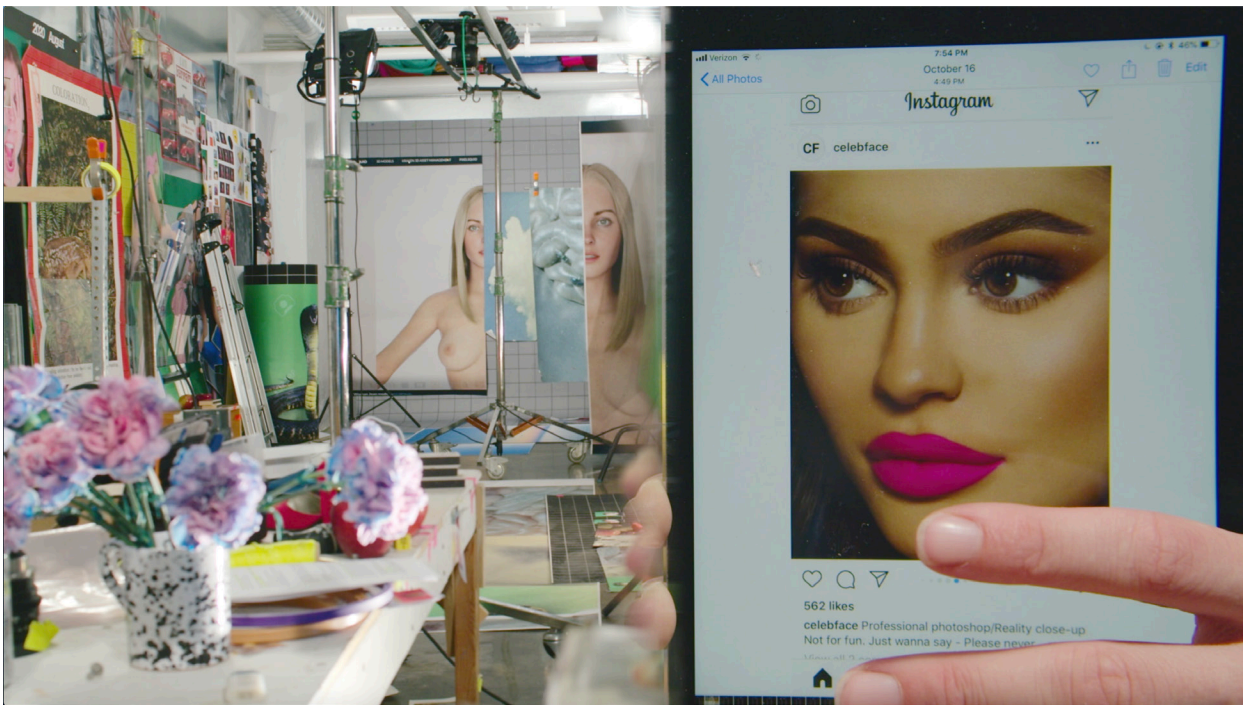
online spaces that our images increasingly live through and within.

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Sara Cwynar's 6-channel video installation *Glass Life* (2021), the centerpiece of her first Los Angeles exhibition, which closed at ICA LA in May, underscores the idea that the filtered, pixelated, repurposed, and reproduced photographs and images that we make—and that make our digital worlds—play a meaningful role in our lives even as they are fed through ill-intentioned, corporate containers. Installed in a blue-carpeted gallery with hard, macaroni-shaped benches, the earnest and immersive 19-minute work employs a chaotic chorus of scrolling images; video clips; swimming CGI avatars; and a dense, essay-like voiceover in its exploration of how beauty, power, selfhood, and capital are expressed in our contemporary image culture. While many photographic endeavors default to a characterization of digital space as artificial or flat, *Glass Life* imagines the images that comprise so much of our digital experience as textured, reframing the way that we think about their marked impact in our bodies and lives.

To make *Glass Life*, Cwynar brought digitally-sourced images and photographs into the physical world, printing and arranging them in her studio before animating them on camera. Pulled largely from books, social media, e-commerce, and news sites, the printed cutouts were laid out atop grid paper between layers of glass that create a sense of physical distance between them. In the installation, the stream of unmoored images loops, rewinds, and changes pace (from fast to faster) across the largest central screen, while two smaller ones situated on either side linger on and expand certain moments. Meanwhile, a male voice actor reads a searching, referential text that spans the duration of the film (he begins didactically, declaring, "From Walter B. to Kim K..."; but what follows





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Top: Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life* (video still) (2021). Six-channel 2K video with sound, 19 minutes. © Sara Cwynar. Image courtesy of the artist; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; Foxy Production, New York; and ICA LA.

Bottom: Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life* (installation view) (2021). © Sara Cwynar. Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; 2022. Image courtesy of the artist; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; Foxy Production, New York; and ICA LA. Photo: Jeff McLane/ICA LA.

is far more open-ended). Many of the images are identifiable, or at least familiar, as they contain logos, celebrities, and copyrighted characters. But each slides offscreen far too quickly to be truly legible. Among the rapid sequence of images are shiny apples and the early, rainbow iteration of Apple's logo; the pig face emoji; a chest X-ray; Disney's Pinocchio character; personal video footage from a racial justice protest, the remnants of the Barneys New York "blowout" closing sale, and an exhibition at Rome's Galleria Borghese; screen recordings from the hype-y fashion retailer SSENSE; kitschy vintage ads; and a confetti-trimmed portrait of the 30 or so world leaders present at the 2019 G20 summit, including Trump, Putin, and the Saudi crown prince. This collage-in-motion approach is an apt visualization of what it feels like to be online, where images of our intimate, daily lives press up against memes, photographs of war, and filtered selfies of influencers peddling discounts on whatever product.

In offering even temporary physicality to the kinds of images we see almost exclusively on-screen, Cwynar insists upon their integrity, underscoring the particular marks they bear, which our eyes usually glaze over—reading them solely as functions of the apps and programs in which we interface with them rather than relevant components of the images themselves. But throughout the film, these peripheral details are permitted, and they are important to understanding the pictures. Images are framed within browser windows, Instagram feeds, and iPhone albums. They are made miniature as thumbnails and avatars or enlarged beyond their pixel depth. Some are partially covered by the Getty Images watermark, Youtube's red "play" logo, or the fuchsia-colored units of measurement that materialize temporarily when an image is dragged around in Photoshop. These distinctly digital marks mix with analog ones, whose textures (the dot pattern characteristic of halftone prints, contact sheets, dust,

degradation, age) have been further emphasized by their digital reproduction. Digital space, and the internet especially, has long been described as one that flattens its contents, negating a sense of distance, time, and nuance. But even as it presents digital images—(often) void of their original context—with speed and excess, *Glass Life* reinforces their objecthood in such a way that they do not collapse or meld together. Their surfaces are each dense with information and impact.

Many of the included images are absurd and disturbing, not in appearance but in context. (It was on my screen at home, watching via a viewing link where I could pause and rewind, that I could begin to unfold them.) The Saudi crown prince smiles, standing front and center in the G20 photo, taken just months after the brutal assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by the Saudi government. The chest X-ray belongs to Marilyn Monroe and was part of a suite of three that went for \$45,000 at auction—even the insides of her body up for public consumption.<sup>2</sup> Catching glimpses of these images as you sit, encircled by screens, makes the overstimulating effect of the digital realm—wherein you are always missing something—palpable in the body. Like the digital spaces that we inhabit, photographs can conceal systems of power. Rather than invoke false metaphors of flatness as a means of reducing or resisting those powers, Cwynar layers and unfurls them. But it is primarily the content of the poetic voiceover that imbues the work with criticality. Appropriately, *Glass Life* takes its title and focus from Shoshana Zuboff's urgent 2019 book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, which uses the term to describe the broad degradation of privacy in the digital age—our lives, and our images, sold as data that's used (at best!) to sell more things back to us. "Every casual search, like, and click was claimed as an asset," Cwynar's narrator declares, his voice at once authoritative, encyclopedic, and soothing: "we don't mind."<sup>3</sup>

But even as it exposes and prods the insidiousness of our online experiences, *Glass Life* manages a level of nuance that so much work about the internet tends to miss, asking how we locate and what it means to represent ourselves in these tenuous, bursting, and thin spaces, *especially* when every aspect of a life lived online is mined and exploited by corporate interests. “How do you know what size you are?/ In the glass life,” the narrator asks, “Or how much space to take?”<sup>4</sup> Cwynar’s voice can be heard here and elsewhere in the voiceover, emanating from individual speakers near the back of the room where three smaller screens each feature a version of the same glitchy, tired-looking, stock AI character. Outfitted in swimsuits and caps, the robot audience mouth Cwynar’s parts of the script, which echo and merge with the male narrator’s voice in a kind of unintelligible hum. After a while, the ceaseless stream of images is like a hum, too. The swimmers close their eyes and sway.

Cwynar inserts herself amidst this flood of images. So beyond her voice, she is also visually present, appearing many times throughout the film: pinning printouts to her studio wall; posing before a green screen; running her hand over a collection of printed images and odd, plastic-y objects on a table. Most intimate, perhaps, is the inclusion of her iPad’s photo album, which she sends into a rapid scroll, swiping her middle and index fingers over the images. They span nearly a year. Personal snapshots—of neighborhood streets, in her studio, trying on what looks like a wedding dress—speed by and mix with screenshots.<sup>5</sup> A *New York Times* headline reads, “There Is Too Much Happening.” Looking feels invasive, but the revelation of such private records—the kinds we all amass and rarely account for—seems to refuse straightforward participation in an image economy that works by making our lives look different or better or neat and digestible. In contrast to the highly produced advertising images that pop up on near-every website

or the neat, curated carousels of social media, Cwynar offers a mess of images—the whole album. She occupies a vulnerable position by taking space within the very systems that she criticizes, suggesting that there is still a worthwhile reason for doing so. Her body and personal photographs serve as proxies for all of us who receive, contribute to, and are affected in real life by the images that we encounter and generate via screens.

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Depicting the vivid complexities of digital life is a challenging task for photography—nearly impossibly so for “straight” photography—because digital spaces are not by definition readily photographable. As such, many photographic projects engage with only the surfaces of these spaces and thus criticize our preoccupation with technology at the implied cost of “real” experience—relatively low-hanging fruit. Some of the earliest photographic responses to the onset of the digital age depict the ubiquity of screens in public and private spaces. Many of the photographs in Martin Parr’s book on global tourism, first published in 1996 and titled *Small World*,<sup>6</sup> depict travelers taking photographs at cultural sites—iPhones, point-and-shoot cameras, and selfie sticks appear in outstretched hands before statues at the Vatican, the *Mona Lisa*, and other popular landmarks. Matthew Pillsbury’s gorgeous black-and-white series of long exposures, *Screen Lives* (2002–ongoing), comprises photographs lit only by the presence of glowing screens. In both instances, photographic subjects almost invariably read as distracted and unengaged, their attention turned to their devices instead of to the surrounding world. They appear to miss out on the “real” experience of looking as they obsessively document; they are absorbed by screens in even their most intimate moments. Even though they are also beautiful and amusing, these





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Top: Erik Kessels, *24HRS in Photos*  
(installation view) (2011).  
Image courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Martin Parr, *The Louvre, Paris, France* (2012).  
Image courtesy of the artist and Magnum Photos.

photographs feel critical of their subjects, portraying digital devices as mere portals to an empty, artificial realm. This critical eye is fair; it reveals uncomfortable truths. But these photographs show people engaging with their digital worlds without ultimately saying much about what that engagement *feels* like.

Many projects in the late aughts and 2010s focused more on the physicality of the digital realm, attempting to picture it in more self-reflexive ways. Tabitha Soren's large-format photographs of images on iPad screens smeared with fingerprints in *Surface Tension* (2013–21) consider how we interact with untouchable images. In his environmentally-stressful installation *24HRS in Photos* (2011), Erik Kessels filled an Amsterdam gallery with small printouts of all of the images uploaded to Flickr in a single day—the 350 thousand photographs piled high across the gallery's rooms, their individual significance collapsing into an undifferentiated mass.<sup>7</sup> And in David Horvitz's *Nostalgia* (18,600) (2019–21), 18.6 thousand of the artist's personal digital photographs were projected for a minute each and then deleted in a sort of protest against a perceived loss of photographic intention. Many of these projects are smart and compelling in their own right. Still, they each seem to represent the role of digital images in our lives somewhat reductively, focusing more on the distance and estrangement of photography than on what the proliferation of photographic engagement/ entanglement means or the kinds of possibilities it offers.

All rendered on backlit screens at 72 dots-per-inch, digital images have been broadly misunderstood as flat and smooth because they exist and unfold in a space similarly imagined as shapeless and in comparison to their analog predecessors or counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Although *Glass Life* ultimately employs a 2-D medium, Cwynar subverts the surface-based nature of video to depict a digital life that feels lived-in: the film's images are so intentionally

chosen that even the appropriated ones are imbued with a sense of personal import. In this way, Cwynar uses images to trace a path through digital space that is less algorithmic than a record of impact, the massive and incessant weight of online images and information expressed through a distinct physical body. I do not know what is still possible for photography under the conditions of the glass life, but in depicting digital spaces as vivid, vast, and navigable, Cwynar suggests that there is value in swimming through the flood of images, and thus also reason to protect the independence and integrity of the spaces in which photographs now live. Photography has always been a malleable and transgressive medium in its implications and impact—on our bodies, psyches, and notions of self—and even within the troubling systems of our slick and irresistible digital world, using it in service of a genuine pursuit of the self against a flood of nefarious images and information offers rich and resistant possibilities.

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1. Lucy Sante, "On Becoming Lucy Sante," *Vanity Fair*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2022/01/on-becoming-lucy-sante>.
2. "Marilyn Monroe's chest X-rays sell for \$45,000," *The Telegraph*, June 28, 2010, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/celebritynews/7858340/Marilyn-Monroe-chest-X-rays-sell-for-45000.html>.
3. Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life*, 2021, six-channel 2K video with sound, 19:02. Transcript courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.
4. Ibid.
5. Kelly Pendergrast argues that screenshots are part of the essential vernacular photographic language of our time, functioning as incredibly personal records that depict our digital experiences. Like the snapshot, "the screenshot is a gesture that lays claim to the act of seeing," she writes—"a slightly piratic and makeshift activity, not yet subsumed into the seamless logic of other kinds of digital image making and distribution." See: Kelly Pendergrast, "Screen Memories," *Real Life*, January 14, 2021, <https://reallifemag.com/screen-memories/>.
6. Martin Parr, *Small World* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2018).
7. "Photos that changed the world – 24 Hrs In Photos," *Phaidon*, May 2016, <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/photography/articles/2016/may/04/photos-that-changed-the-world-24-hrs-in-photos/>.
8. In 2014, Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian published an open letter to the FCC in favor of net neutrality, writing that "the world isn't flat; but the world wide web *is*." His characterization of the digital world was meant to describe it as a democratized space—a level playing field—but from its inception, it has been imagined as a 2-D counterpart to the physical/ "real" world. Nathan Jurgenson's illuminating writing on the subject argues that "the fallacy of web objectivity is driven fundamentally by digital dualism," a term he coined to describe the pervasive notion that a divide exists between real and online spaces, the latter of which we understand as artificial by comparison. But "physicality can be digitally mediated," he insists, and "what happens through the screen happens through bodies and material infrastructures." See: Alexis Ohanian, "Y Combinator has filed an official comment with the FCC," Y Combinator, July 14, 2014, <https://www.ycombinator.com/blog/y-combinator-has-filed-an-official-comment-with-the-fcc/>; Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (New York: Verso Books, 2019), 82; Jurgenson, "Digital Dualism and the Fallacy of Web Objectivity," *The Society Pages*, September 13, 2011, <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/09/13/digital-dualism-and-the-fallacy-of-web-objectivity/>.