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QUARANTINE

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Abstract

Quarantine is a photographic project conducted in 40 countries during the period between March and July of 2020, in which there were restrictions on the movement of people due to the new coronavirus pandemic. The pictures were captured using a photographic camera remotely, via a computer screen, through video call applications. Upon previous contact with the participants, who had told me about the challenges and changes in their routine due to the pandemic, we would choose a moment in their day so I could observe part of this routine through digital equipment, which culminated in some of the pictures presented.

Keywords: Quarantine, Remote photography, Documentary photography, Photographic essay, Pandemic

1 Introduction

The pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus resulted in the interruption of several presential activities, along with challenges both in the social and family interactions, and in leisure and communication, in and out of work. Although social distancing has been a strategy to contain viruses in other pandemics, this is the first time it occurs in a global proportion, virtually at the same time. This is also the first time we have an instant communication network, which might give the impression that the distances between people were reduced immediately. The digital gadgets' screen and the Internet have become critical components in communication. Moreover, as a photographer and visual artist, I used both components to structure the *Quarantine* project and to approach individuals from 40 different countries, who opened their home for me using their cell phones or tablets.

Inseo Lee, from the Republic of Korea (Figure 1), is one of these cases. On this side, a computer, a webcam, a video call service, and a professional photographic camera on a tripod. Every day, Inseo takes a break from his work at home to carry out entertaining activities with the children. On that particular day, they produced an explosion using the gas in a soft drink.



Fig. 1: Inseo Lee, 43, and his family, Seongnam-si, the Republic of Korea. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

I had never experienced this remote work method before, which seeks to depict people's privacy worldwide through a photographic instant of their daily life during these pandemic times. Janaína (Figure 2), from São Paulo, Brazil, resumed practicing tango at home, after 15 years away from dance lessons.



Fig. 2: Janaína, 35, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

According to the media and the World Health Organization, the safety measures to contain the pandemic caused a third of the world's population to have any restrictions of movement between March and June. Leaving home had become dangerous, and it had to be inside of it that adjustments had to be made, both in the routine and in communicating and interacting with others. At this beginning of a pandemic social interaction, I had noticed that each individual had unique challenges.

As a visual artist and field photographer, my challenge was to turn my computer and the Internet into this possible photographic imaging production field, where presence and meeting up would happen through the digital world's lenses. As I spoke to friends living abroad or who had acquaintances in different countries, an experience exchanging network started to take shape. Several of these contacts agreed to be part of the *Quarantine* project.

Quarantine seeks to depict, on an intimate level, this unsettling and tragic moment the world is going through. Upon chatting about sensations, challenges and changes in daily life, the participant and I would decide together which cutout we would be depicting remotely. Following this, we would schedule a day and time in which I would be, via video call, in their home.

Several analyses about the participants' life surfaced during the process and they would share them with me. As Pascal (Figure 3), 56, resident in Luxembourg, told me: "I used to spend the day in the office, and my house felt like a dormitory. I am learning again to take care of my own life, and rescuing my essence." Pascal started to iron his clothes again after he and his housekeeper had to quarantine.



Fig. 3: Pascal, 56, Luxembourg. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

March's third week had arrived – the moment when everything was halted, and the pandemic officially hit Brazil. There was an increase in the number of cases and, by the hour, my inbox kept receiving e-mails canceling jobs and projects that had been planned for the semester. Two weeks had gone by and I was experiencing conflicting emotions. An entirely unpredictable future was right in front of us, ready to raise more questions.

On the one hand, the media was tirelessly covering the pandemic from a journalistic perspective, highlighting the number of hospitalizations, crowded places, deaths, and even the relatives of individuals who contracted the virus. On the other hand, I was told by that same media that over thirty percent of the world's population was in quarantine or, at the least, experiencing restrictions on movement.

On the streets, fear ruled. Marcelo (Figure 4), a resident in a district in the outskirts of São Paulo, a city with a high number of cases, was witnessing life from behind his gate. Inside of home was where the ones who could stay on lockdown had to cope with new feelings, challenges, conflicts, and routine adjustments.



Fig. 4: Marcelo, 53, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

While deprived of social interaction, the individuals who took part in several professional and entertaining activities were now having to interact intensely with themselves or family members. Small everyday actions would reach new levels. Interacting with others would now happen with the use of gadgets' screens. Even classes, previously presential, would be conducted on a computer, as it was the case of the ukulele lessons taken by Syasya (Figure 5), a resident in Malaysia.



Fig. 5: Syasya, 24, Pulau Penang, Malaysia. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

While trying to understand this alternate way of living, and realizing that the challenges would vary considerably from person to person, based on their mental, financial, family, professional, and geographical conditions, one question came to my mind: how are people doing within their home? And soon after: how could I photograph them despite not being able to be in their home?

I remembered a famous quote in the photography world, credited to Robert Capa: "If your pictures are not good enough, you are not close enough," cited by Joan Fontcuberta in his book *Pandora's Camera* (2012, pp. 148, our translation). We were all apart, seeing each other only through technological gadgets. Somehow, cellphones and new applications offering calls via screens could make one "present" anywhere – at the least, anywhere with an Internet connection and suitable communication devices.

Citing Joan Fontcuberta (2012, pp. 148, our translation) again on Capa's quote:

His statement must be appropriately contextualized for one to understand the trap it contains. Closeness provides detail, but it also leads to shortsightedness: it removes the frame, it prevents us from understanding the overall situation. Capa gets nearer physically – and with that, he gets involved and gets to know – to be able to get further away optically – and with that, he clarifies and makes known. We will find him in the front row, next to the soldier who shoots or who gets shot, but his wide-angle lens captures the entire scene. In a way, paparazzi are the opposite of Capa, because they are, in fact, physically far, but optically near: hidden behind their powerful telephoto lenses, they focus on the sneaky kiss or the dropped bra, whatever the context is. Far near, near-far.

2 Far near, near-far

I was far and, as much as a paparazzi, I could not move inside the framing selected. However, the possibility to meet was provided by video call applications using the cellphones' cameras – usually built-in with wide-angle lenses, allowing a certain closeness between, at least, the participant and their equipment and, consequently, with me, who could see them through it. As a documentarist, I would be invited to enter their home and depict, on an intimate level, a small cutout of the moment afforded to me, captured during a call that would last minutes and, at times, even hours. This is how the *Quarantine* project came to be.

Through an extensive network of acquaintances worldwide, I met people with varied connection degrees – friends and acquaintances participating and referring their friends, cousins, friends of friends – from 40 different countries.

I met the filmmaker Mamadou (Figure 6), from Senegal, the pharmacist Caroline (Figure 7), from Italy, and the artist Fahime (Figure 8), from Iran, using this network.



Fig. 6: Mamadou, 38, Dakar, Senegal. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.



Fig. 7: Carolina, 31, Milan, Italy. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

I did not know most individuals I photographed at first. Nevertheless, the pandemic experience they had in common, in addition to my desire to listen to them, provided fascinating virtual meetings.



Fig. 8: Fahime, 45, and her son, Tehran, Iran. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

Before the photography capturing moment, we would have a lengthy conversation about their personal and family experience in the pandemic situation. The participant would tell me what had changed in their daily

routine and what considerations permeated their life in confinement. Following that conversation, we would decide together which cutout could be remotely photographed – an intimate document in a historic moment.

Danilla, for example, quarantined with her mother, who was living on her own, in Ponta Grossa, Brazil. Together, they started circular dancing, and, according to Danilla, they were reconnecting after many years living apart. As a result, this was the selected moment for my visit (Figure 9).



Fig. 9: Danilla, 39, and Rosita, 74, Ponta Grossa, Brazil. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

Being invited to meet these individuals' homes, families, furniture, and habits, I sought angles, lights, stories and poetry for the image-building process as if I were physically present. Additionally, on several occasions, I contemplated to myself: "Look at this powerful picture, maybe if I were there, I would have taken the same photograph." The picture I took of Milde (Figure 10), a 61-year-old woman from Recife, Brazil, while she sewed is one of these cases. Milde had bought a sewing machine – a dream of hers for ten years – and learned how to sew through online searches.

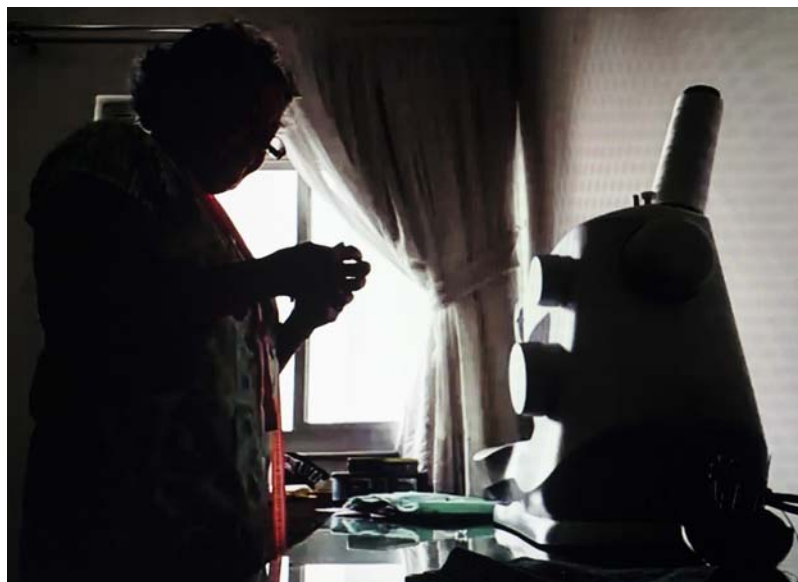


Fig. 10: Milde, 61, Recife, Brazil. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

Nevertheless, the framing angles and positions were limited to the subject's possibilities in placing their cell phone or tablet. The framing was also dependent on whether the subject agreed with some of my suggestions. The framing would not depend only on me: I needed the subject to position "my eye".

However, despite the adaptations due to social distancing, photographing would happen similarly to what I am used to doing on-site. When it comes to photographing people, I believe that part of the picture's composition is directly related to the photographer. Another part pertains to the relationship between the photographer and the photographed. And even a third one, which is what the subject brings into the scene. The combination of these three parts is what shapes my photography. And there it was, the photography,

having the subject's active engagement, with a relationship established digitally, in an intimacy enabled digitally. I, the photographer, was building it in front of several cameras.

This admittedly collaborative construction may generate some questioning concerning objectivity in the documentary process that, initially, had an intention, even if it is often contested. At first, the contestation rises because the photographer necessarily selects various items before photographing: what will be in frame and what will be out of frame? From what point of view will they create the image? What part of the story will they tell? Shouldn't the photography always be accomplished from the photographer's subjectivity? Chiodetto observes that

Other photographers, when identifying the existing tension in documentary photography – between the desire to prove the existence of things and the polysemic nature which makes it slide to fiction and the viewer's free interpretation – noticed during this heralded crisis the possibility to portray the world from subjectivity and dialectics intrinsic to human actions.

The always fleeting and evidently unreachable idea of an absolute truth leaves the stage, or from a compelling point of view about a specific subject, and the photographer now establishes a more organic and oneiric relationship with the photographic subject (CHIODETTO, 2013, pp. 19-20, our translation).

The pictures, hence permeated with subjectivity, broaden this documentary's outlines without abandoning it. The supposed objectivity is no longer needed. The relationships and means used to build these pictures also tell a story.

There was, at least, three sets of lenses between the subjects and myself. My photographic camera was the tool that would capture the computer screen, which in turn displayed the captured image through the gadget's lens of the individual on the other side. And they would see me through yet another camera. As a result, the pictures display the texture of as many gadgets present between myself, the photographer, and them, the photographed, which contributed to mark this time using the feasible tools for the encounters. Despite the many optical objects between myself and them, intimacy occurs most of the time, as we may see in Mariana, Edison, and Francisco's family picture (Figure 11).

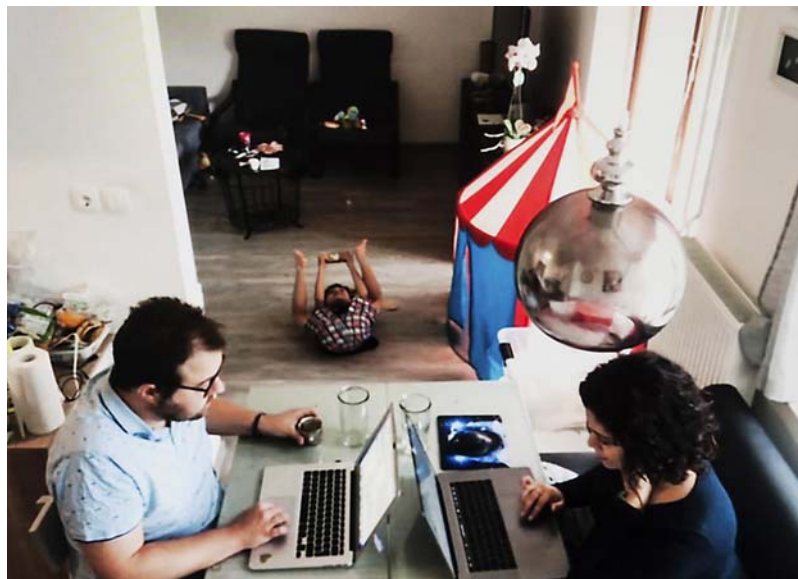


Fig. 11: Mariana, 34, Edison, 35, Francisco, 6, live in Bled, Slovenia. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.



Fig. 12: Verônica, 32, Canada. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

Veronica's depression, in Canada (Figure 12), dialogues with Laura's procrastination, in France (Figure 13), who is on the phone in her kitchen whenever she is not able to concentrate on work. Differently, Léo can finally gaze at the stars from his rooftop by working at home (Figure 14). However, another rooftop is turned into an office, sharing the space with the barbecue grill and the laundry room in Enzo's grandparents' house.



Fig. 13: Laura, 46, Calce, France. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.



Fig. 14: Léo, 34, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.



Fig. 15: Enzo, 24, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

Also in an outdoor space, Fernanda, who lives in Buenos Aires, spends considerably more time with her cats on her apartment's balcony. In a world pre-pandemic, she could only watch the sunset when she was at home on weekends (Figure 16).



Fig. 16: Fernanda, 46, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

3 Final considerations

This project was only possible with the use of the Internet. The web is another element that helps to tell this story: depending on the subject's area and social class, we obtain an image that may be more or less clear, or more or less pixelated, as we can see in pictures 17 and 18. Márcio (Figure 17) resumed practicing the violin during his work breaks at home. In contrast, Ana Raquel (Figure 18) cannot use the Internet for entertainment purposes because her access to it is restricted and expensive.



Fig. 17: Márcio, 40, Sydney, Australia. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.



Fig. 18: Ana Raquel, 37, Soyapango, El Salvador. Photo: Dani Sandrini, 2020.

While the use of the Internet is fully established, especially among the middle and upper classes living in large cities, we can still encounter obstacles: a large portion of individuals worldwide do not have access to it – neither for work nor for entertainment. At times, I communicated via text and audio messages with individuals who, during the conversation, would tell me that they did not provide enough Internet access to

support a video call. Thus, the absence of an economically less privileged class in this project results from the world's massive social inequalities.

Overall, I photographed 110 people from all continents, totaling 40 countries. The project includes individuals of varying ethnicities, genders, careers, and social classes. The differences in financial, geographical, and mental conditions are blatant worldwide – which is not new information for those with a watchful eye on the news. The pandemic sheds light on this because, with fewer resources and limited circulation, the issues tend to worsen even more.

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