

***This paper discusses the challenges of maintaining a photographic art practice without taking photographs. It considers this through ideas about parallel diasporas, their physical and digital definition as we know them, and the proposal of digitally-isolated space. In what follows, I address the question: how might all three definitions intersect through a common impulse to perform what Marianne Hirsch calls an “affiliative gaze”- but in COVID-19 space-time.***

The idea for this paper was born out of my artistic practice, concerned with the photographic image and its role in memory and myth. Geographical distance is bridged through online interaction, and witnessing a mass sharing of photographs online of pre-Covid 19 experience led to a theoretical reflection on the parallels between geographic diasporas and the proposed idea of a space-time diaspora in co-constructing belonging through a kind of digitally intimate narrative creation.

In this paper I discuss the challenges of maintaining a largely photographic art practice during Covid -19 lockdowns. Through reflection on the work I produced during this period I will sketch the outlines of a parallel digital diaspora separate from, but intersecting with existing definitions - through the common impulse to perform an “affiliative gaze”.<sup>1</sup> The question as to whether we need a new definition is not in the aim of theoretical exactitude - rather a means to think about the circulation of the photographic image as a cultural practice of “negotiating multiple belongings”<sup>2</sup> and how a mass-migration, so to speak, online during covid-19 lockdown prompts us to think more broadly about connection and dislocation. In relation to the sharing of photographic images, digital intimacy is not a crashout of random circulations, but an outcome and compounder of existing cultural practices, affording an intensity that is of, and reflects networked distribution of images that affirm collective mythologies.



Figure 1.

I build installations that resemble worn-out memorials commemorating remains of a “non-absent” past.<sup>3</sup> In these installations fragmented photographic images and objects related to my familial narrative, are arranged as a temporal conceit directed towards a sense of an uncanny lacking and an inability to translate multiple signs into a consolidated memory or history. Salman Rushdie describes inherited myths as “remains” of memories that act like symbols in our creatively

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<sup>1</sup> A performative adoption of photographic images into our familial and personal narratives. Marianne Hirsch. “Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory.” (Harvard University Press, 1997), 69.

<sup>2</sup> On the role of the digital diaspora in the migrant experience. Sandra Ponzanesi. “Digital Diasporas: Postcoloniality, Media and Affect.” *Interventions* DOI 10 (2020): 1.

<sup>3</sup> A posited conceptual space where the past remains present, occupied by objects or places that incite a sense of the uncanny. Ewa Domanska, “The Material Presence of the Past.” *History and Theory Journal* 45, No.3 (2006): 10.

constructed personal narratives.<sup>4</sup> Through my artistic practice I consider a collective propensity to shape inherited memories into myths; and how this process affects a sense of belonging.

My interest in the relationship between the photograph and myth stems from my personal experience growing up as the daughter of a Sicilian economic migrant. My mum was part of a 26 Million peopled Italian diaspora, a non-victim, voluntary movement. She arrived in Perth as a young girl in the 1960's and a connection to Sicily and Sicilians, I feel, became mythologised through the vernacular photographs and histories told by my family.

The Affiliative gaze is a term used by visual culture academic, Marianne Hirsch to describe a personal and emotive identification with a familial photograph - a performative affiliation with a collective history or memory.<sup>5</sup> In the case of diasporas, the affiliative gaze also rests on images of the homeland. Historian Betty Bergland writes in the context of the general definition of Diaspora - the mass movement and scattering of people and about the function of the physical photograph in migrant biographies — stating the vernacular photograph's impactful role in constructing an ethnic identity and collective memory through a mode institutionally accepted as one of objectivity and truth.<sup>6</sup>

The Digital Diaspora permeates post-colonial theory, Postcolonial researcher Sandra Ponzanesi points out. She cites sociologist Manuel Castells in describing it's flow into media, science and anthropology schools much like the “network of flows” that facilitate new modes of diasporic



Figure 2.

<sup>4</sup> “The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because, they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities.” Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*.” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*; edited by Bill Ashcroft, (Routledge, 2006), 429.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, Hirsch.

<sup>6</sup> Betty Bergland, “Rereading Photographs and Narratives in Ethnic Autobiography: Memory and Subjectivity in Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*,” in *Memory, Narrative and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*, ed. Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., Robert E. Hogan (Boston.: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 46.

affiliation. Transnational identity can be shaped through these flows as images and corresponding narratives are shared through networks of diasporic kin, brought together not solely by the cognitive idea of a physical homeland but through a sense of loss and nostalgia.<sup>7</sup>

In industrialised nations, COVID-19 has led to a mass ‘migration’ so to speak, from the natural world to the digital space. As social interaction, work, health, entertainment and everyday errands become homogenised through a handful of online platforms, people are sharing vernacular photographic images of pre-lockdown experiences - performatively affiliating themselves with a space-time they more closely associate with their identity.

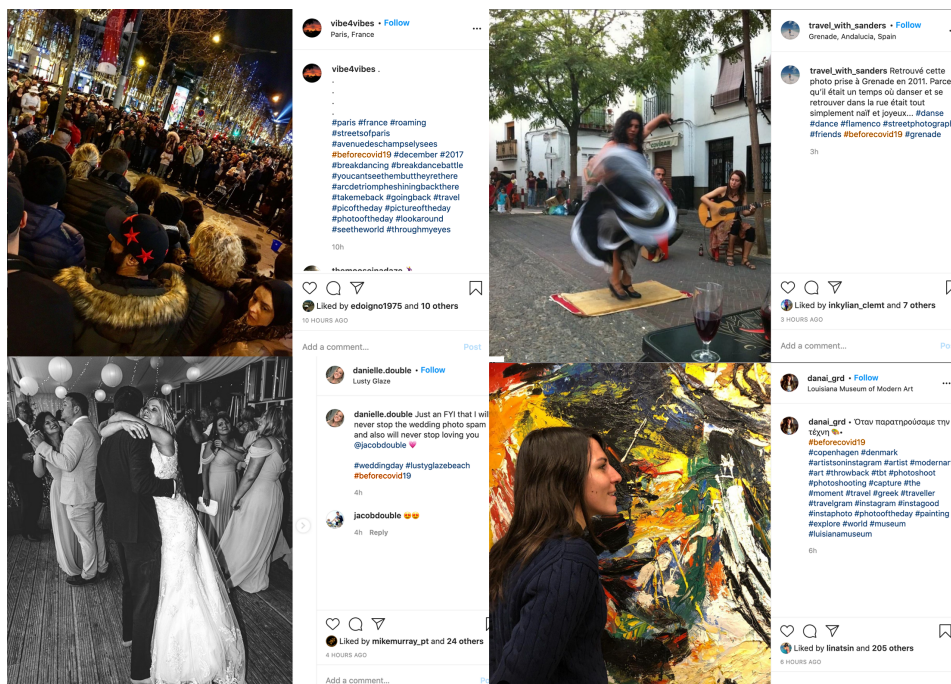


Figure 3.

While not suggesting a simplistic similarity between the lives and experiences of diasporic people and the proposed Covid-19 time-space diaspora, it’s interesting to consider the constant of the photograph in mediating a sense of identity loss in both experiences. Being a visual artist, imagery is helpful when considering the idea of three separate diasporas intersecting through the impulse to perform an afflictive gaze. We can think of the gaze as a stake or multiple stakes in the ground, the point around which each strand or definition of diaspora wraps around, touching at the point of emotive affiliation that mediates their onward flow.

Sociologist George Lipstitz writes that photograph’s, “..situate memory and subjectivity in time and space, historically and geographically, they provide a meaningful site for examining cultural meanings associated with ethnicity and subjectivity.” He writes this in the context of what he calls “counter memory” where histories of non-dominant ethnicities are detached from those of the

<sup>7</sup> ibid Pozanesi, 5.

Western Cannon through personal memory.<sup>8</sup> Literary professor Terry De Hay, writing about ethnic narratives in popular fiction points out that a deliberate contrast between the mythic nature of mothers narratives and the normative lives of their daughters creates a dialogue about a collective culture outside of that which dominates.<sup>9</sup>

My family are European and therefore sit within a dominating hegemonic cultural group, but there remains a very localised narrative embedded in the geography and the space-time of family photographs of Sicily, underscored by the material that carries it's image; that I feel incites a comparison to subsequent white-bread suburban life and affects an emotive gaze and conscious affiliation with an idea of home (Sicily) which is no longer so.

An example of a localised geography in Sicily, is that of Mt Etna, an active volcano who's image dominates through photographs and domestic motifs. It's image carries a fatalistic quality that comes near to the mood I experienced when developing a sense of cultural belonging through the experience of viewing family photographs and hearing stories of Sicily. It's a mood I felt again when Covid-19 led to a lockdown. Largely dislocated from the space-time I had experienced up until this point, unable to access workshops or studio space, or to take planned trips to take new photographs - I found myself pointing a mobile phone at a live-cam of Mt Etna's peak.



Figure 4.

Mt Etna, historically was a landmark for fishermen and sailors and I feel it's become somewhat of a cultural landmark across the seas for my family. Homer and Virgil wrote about both its fecundity and destructivity, a hybridity that's become a vernacular regionalism pegging our family to a fertile

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<sup>8</sup> George Lipsitz. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 83.

<sup>9</sup> Terry DeHay, "Narrating Memory," in *Memory, Narrative and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*, ed. Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., Robert E. Hogan (Boston.: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 31.

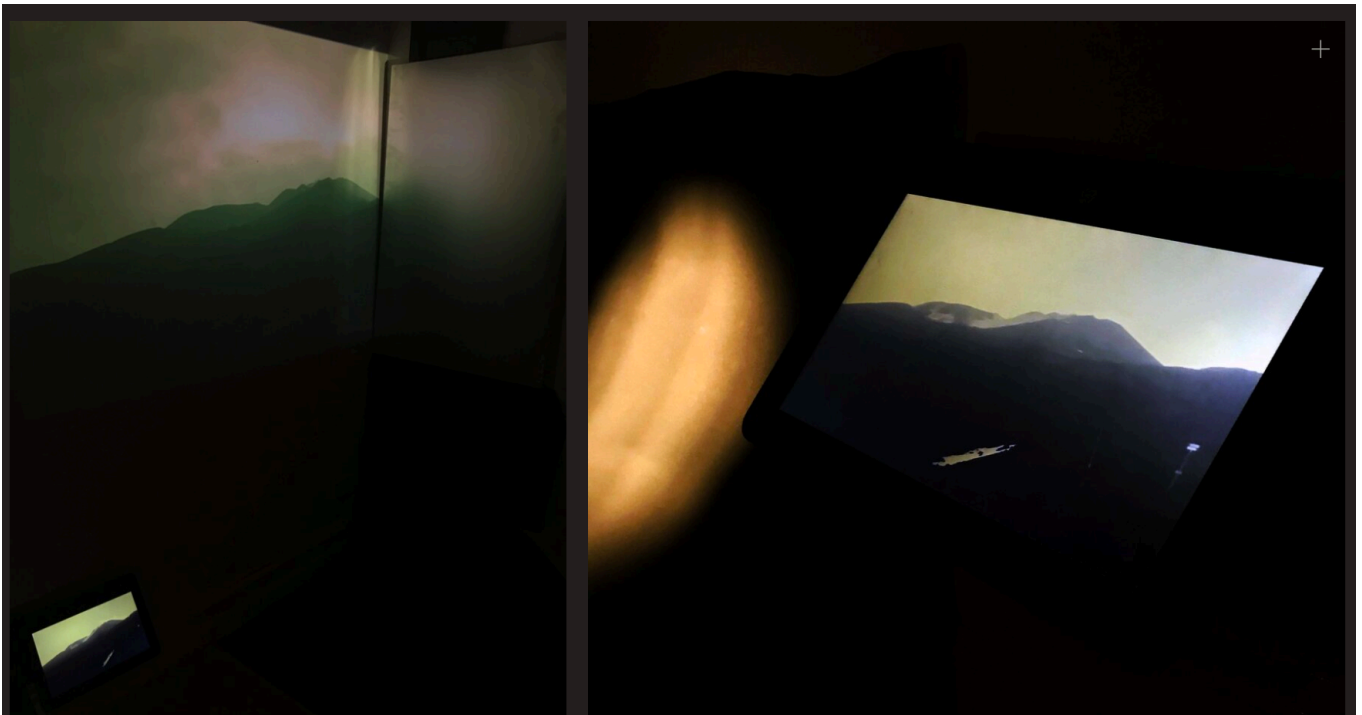


Figure 5.

Sicily and a fatalistic transnationalism imposing on our future. It's image is also a landscape, landscapes are historical sites and naturalise social constructions when society determines their meaning through repetitive and ritualised engagement with their physical and represented sites - a performance I repeat through process. Developing, enlarging, scanning, re-enlarging, printing, stringing up and projecting onto images of landscape.

Without the ability to engage with many of these processes and with extremely limited access to the natural world, engaging with a subject that is both of homeland and of what I'll refer to as home-space-time, using photography by proxy (tele-space), I continued to perform a ritual process of emotive connection to imagery strongly related to ideas of belonging and identity.

The 45 minutes of mobile phone footage, resulted in multiple iterations of installation in my front room which is approximately 2.5 x 2m squared. The most amusing to neighbours was a piece of aluminium sheeting swinging from a ceiling fan as the digitally projected footage appears and disappears. I tinted the footage a corrosive looking green, projected it onto old canvas prints of Mt Etna, it was repeated on smaller monitors and film projectors flickered empty frames onto slumped prints.

The covid "monuments" memorialised the gaps more than the images which are torn, faded, grainy, scratched or obscured by reflective materials on which I project blank frames, or inversely image-ed projections are obscured by upright structures. While the drive was an emotional one, to assert a sense of belonging through photographic images, to me the gaps between the projected and hidden photograph and the visible and invisible represent a latency between inherited narratives and unknown histories and futures. The gaps are possibilities for future selves unbound from myth.

The mass sharing of vernacular digital photographs of pre-pandemic life is an intimate display of personal vulnerability during a crisis, but is far from being an inventive outcome of the unprecedented movement to the tele-space. I have argued that it's rather a familiar performative social function parallel to diasporic modes of connection and belonging and intersects the traditional definitions at a metaphorical point of emotive affiliation.

My question as to whether we need a new definition of the digital diaspora isn't something that can be answered here but what I have tried to offer is more of a provocation to consider the nuances of connection and dislocation in the context of digital intimacy beyond binaries of utopia and control and communities and networks. Ontological and semiological theories of the photograph have guided my entry into anything I write, but I believe the crux of it is, like the printing press, the photograph modernised the vernacular story/history and exponentially propagated it's forward motion, our familial and community myths were suddenly carried through means beyond the oral and written. Oral stories predate the image - much like the photograph pre-dates the internet - narrative, myth, the stories we tell ourselves are central to a sense of connection, the photograph by proxy of the internet is merely a means to orient ourselves amongst a series of personal cultural geographies.

The question as to whether digital intimacy has changed/facilitated/negated human connection is moot in my mind, because it's merely a facilitator and compounder of existing social practices of forging a collective identity. As an artist I'm interested in de-orienting people from an automated sense of collective belonging to consider the posited gaps, where unknowable and untold past and future histories may or may not exist.

## Figure List



**Figure 1.**

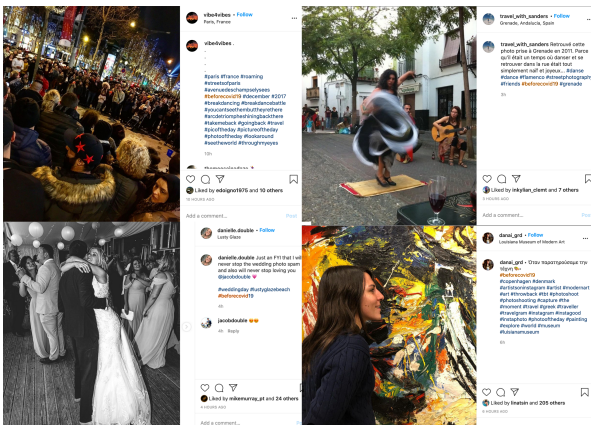
Recollections From Places You've Never Been (Future Remains), 2018. Inkjet prints on canvas from 35mm still, 59.4 x 84.1 cm, steel frames, wire and fixtures, 8mm film projectors - Total installation size 350cm x 150cm.



**Figure 2.**

Recollections From Places You've Never Been, 2018. Inkjet prints on canvas from 35mm still, 90cm x 50cm, 200cm x 200cm steel frame, steel wire.

Remains 1-2, 2018. Inkjet print from 35mm still on paper 140cm x 80cm, aluminium pole, steel wire and fixtures.



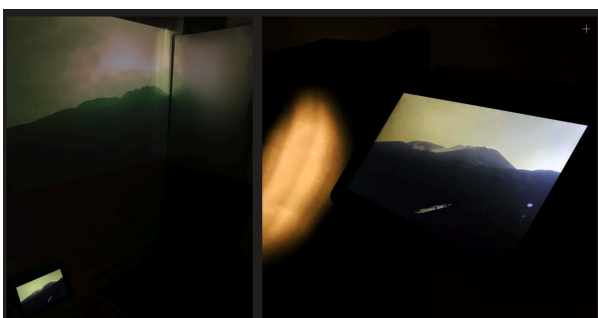
**Figure 3.**

Collection of images taken from Instagram #beforecovid19



**Figure 4.**

Still from mobile phone footage of Mt Etna live-cam - tinted green, 2020.



**Figure 5.**

Still images from Covid Monuments, digital projection of video onto aluminium sheeting, digital display of video, 16mm film projector, 2020.

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