

- 2 Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, Durham, 2016.

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**'Simon Fujiwara: Joanne', The Photographers' Gallery, London, 7 October 2016 – 29 January 2017.**

As of January 2017, there are 2,850 people following @joannesalley on Instagram. Little suggests her account might be part of an artwork. It is populated with edited pictures, each in a digital white frame, mainly of herself and her friends, with the occasional shot of attractively styled food photographed directly from above: all familiar clichés associated with the medium. The first entry on her profile, dating back to August 2016, is an enigmatic teaser clip advertising *Joanne* (2016). Unsettling audio in the form of pulsating dubstep is juxtaposed with a photograph of Joanne Salley herself, which is not just staged but quite obviously so; lying in bed (naturally, her bedding is the crispest shade of white), the heroine smiles as she scrolls through a smartphone. While the focus shifts from her face to the wall behind, an animation of the kind one expects from a PowerPoint presentation announces: 'Good morning Joanne'. A date appears in two parts: 'October 7'. Pause. '2016'.

There thus exist several Joannes, one being Simon Fujiwara's show at The Photographers' Gallery. Seemingly his installation could not be more different from the 'Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s' exhibition running concurrently in the galleries below. 40 years along the timeline of art history, what we

encounter is hardly the deconstruction of womanhood exemplified by the work of Martha Rosler or Ewa Partum. Instead, we are greeted with a series of photographs resembling stock images rather than artworks, larger-than-life pictures of the sort we might find a short walk away from the gallery, in the windows of fashion stores on Oxford Street. This association with retail continues in the second part of the exhibition, a film projection at the back of the room. Utilising the conventions of personalised marketing in the age of Dove's 'Real Beauty' advertising campaign, Fujiwara's portrayal of Joanne begins with a confessional outpouring. Even though the former beauty queen expresses the irreducibility of her persona to a single category (model/teacher/artist/boxer), it is precisely a persona, not a person, speaking to us. Joanne fails to convince her audience to suspend disbelief: 'I feel like I'm nothing, even though I am all of that . . . and more', she says, her declaration seeming far from meaningful in its formulaic banality, not unlike the dubious empowerment offered by T-shirts with feminist slogans now readily available on the high street. Eventually, we are told about the event that precipitated the making of the film: the tabloid scandal which erupted when Joanne's topless images were discovered by a student at the all-boys London public school Harrow, where she had been teaching art. It is solely through this façade, as she calls it, that Joanne is now represented: '[i]t wouldn't matter how many images I pump into the press, I think they'd still go back and use this photo [. . .] I don't have control of that image'. What follows is a controversial strategy to treat Joanne like a product, embracing and exploiting the media's very voyeurism to create a different picture. Numerous

Snapchat clips, photoshoots and film teasers ensue.

Desire plays a key part in the exhibition. The nature of Fujiwara's observation is highly scopophilic, relying heavily on the protagonist's physical features. The link between capitalism and the exploitation of women is made abundantly clear as Joanne, stripped of her surname, embodies what is effectively a merchandising campaign. Fujiwara co-opts the mechanisms of women's oppression, the very point being that already prior to the exhibition and even before the scandal, as Miss Northern Ireland Joanne was not only subject to the gaze but actively participating in a culture of exhibitionism alongside her artistic career. This is not meant as a criticism – far from it. In fact, we do not have to look far – only one or two floors down – for examples of practices to which conventional beauty was widely considered an impediment, if not wholly antithetical (Hannah Wilke being a notable instance). Rather than fight forces that extend far beyond both the space and scope of the exhibition, Fujiwara contributes to their derailment through surplus; instead of deconstructing Joanne's image, he builds an extension to it. Meanwhile, the question of agency remains intentionally unresolved: in a scene capturing a rehearsal for a promotional shoot, Joanne directs the person (literally) acting as her 'brand manager', instructing him on what to say to her.

Rather than its reconfiguration, it is therefore Fujiwara's reproduction of the language of the capitalist spectacle that makes the audience aware of its spectatorship. Affirmative as opposed to subversive, his film is nevertheless an encouragement to engage with voyeurism critically. It is a perverse reminder (and not, as in the

downstairs exhibition, a direct revisiting) of Laura Mulvey's 1975 assertion that 'analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it'.<sup>1</sup>

However, Fujiwara equally acknowledges the very real, affective power of images: the scene of Joanne's tearful return to Harrow is an exercise in taking the media more seriously than they take themselves. Comparisons could be drawn here to Amalia Ulman's performance *Excellences and Perfections* (2014) in which, similarly blurring the line between fact and fiction, the artist utilised her personal Instagram profile to construct herself anew in a dramatic story of emotional twists and turns. But rather than simply muddling the boundary between the two, what Fujiwara investigates are the implications, in an increasingly mediated society, of mistaking art (or Instagram, or the tabloids) for life.

Two levels of self-referentiality operate in the piece: not only is Joanne, the subject, fused with *Joanne*, the work, but, as much as it is documenting a representation, the film also recognises itself as a representation, uniting the production of literal images with the production of one's figurative image. Despite the biographical nature of his installation, the artist does not claim to provide an accurate picture of his protagonist – quite the contrary. Investigating the Barthesian 'reality effect' rather than reality itself, an approach characteristic of Fujiwara's broader practice, *Joanne* exposes the fictions perpetuated by the documentary form.

<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18, p. 8.

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