

*Few Illusions: Josiane M.H. Pozi*

Mousse Magazine, Issue 74, 2021

by Kari Rittenbach

No small consequence of the global pandemic has been the manner in which video content abruptly proliferated through almost every aspect of daily life, often telephonically, on pocket-size screens in lieu of social contact, therapy session, exhibition format, language lesson, and in some cases, political reality. Guy Debord's mediatic nightmare seemed to reach a freaky apotheosis via widespread capitalist faith in digital immediacy, if not Zoom Video Communications Inc. By "eliminating geographical distance [. . .] society produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation."<sup>1</sup>

While medically necessary, separation today comes at the cost of more and more images, livestream events, mise-en-abyme memes, and an ouroboros of news and social media that together overwhelm the sentient subject—well beyond last century's entertaining concept of scripted reality television.<sup>2</sup> Waking life itself takes on the character of its virtual approximation. Who can survive this horror show? It is hard to say where the exponential curve will swing next.

Around the time museums reopened in New York (movie theaters did not), the first solo exhibition of London-based artist Josiane M.H. Pozi was held at Gandt, a gallery project space in the residential neighborhood of Astoria, Queens. Pozi's show was titled after the affecting short film *Pingey* (2019), shot when she was only twenty. The work's lo-fi production (fixed or handheld camera) and heartbreaking proximities (three friends laughing, crowded around a small kitchen table, et cetera) struck a strangely nostalgic tone, while its reflexive anguish anticipated the tragedy of the present, which was (also) already tragedy then: cool neglect for the living.

"Dad, do you love me?"

"Oh god—"

"Like, honestly, do you actually love me?"

"I don't know . . . . . who I am . . . ."

Pozi has made music videos and concert visuals, or contributed footage to projects by musicians Klein, Moses Boyd, Jawnino, and Four Tet. Sound has a clear influence on her editing process, which incorporates staggering or blunt cuts, some found footage, even jittering. Straightforward camerawork—as in the more or less static, wide-angle view of open water for Klein's "care about us" from the album *Frozen* (2020)—may be accompanied by image manipulations involving color inversion, overlays, blur, and distortion. The standard definition feel of Pozi's moving images—soft focus, bright color—also seems to reference early UK grime and garage videos, albeit produced for a post-studio, post-television era. They are abstract and fragmentary, less episodic. Consequently, music often resurfaces in her artworks through diegetic sound: in karaoke sing-along, background podcast, party clamor, or attempted air-guitar solo, as by her mother in *Capture 03 01 18* (2018).

These life rhythms foreground the personal settings for her work—parental flat, student housing, corner pub—and unlike amateur home video, the very raw emotional space Pozi seeks to capture. While she herself often appears on camera, visually or audibly, it is her connection to the various subjects who share her screen that creates frisson in the absence of traditional cinema's "coherent narrative," instead forming a loose portrait of the artist in close relations.<sup>3</sup> Her vignettes describe a kind of social diegesis unfolding in real time for the auteur. Without marking a strict dichotomy between authenticity and artifice, Pozi's inversion of video and experience is a precise post-cinematic

perspective on the hypertrophied feedback loop of performativity that haunts the contemporary period. Whether her approach is realism, documentary, or something else entirely, the unalterable problem of coming of age under such conditions needs little dressing up.

In a striking early passage of *Pingey*—a two-shot with her father, both seated on the sofa, smoking—Pozi first hums quietly, then crescendos on the lyric “But her friend is nowhere to be seen!” from David Bowie’s “Life on Mars” (1971), a beat after the ominous cue: “And her daddy has told her to go.” The song goes on briefly, culminating in Ziggy Stardust’s titular existential question. In a later scene, Pozi’s father suggests the music to which she is dancing (Bobby Caldwell’s “What You Won’t Do for Love” [1977]) is irritating to him, and more suitable for a party. He questions whether she has any friends. Pozi asserts she does, and laughs, but also leaves the room.

*Pingey* alternates between scenes at home and at college, modest spaces with white walls and close quarters. The comfortless new friendships of school contrast with what at first appears to be the peaceful domesticity of family life. When Pozi admits the sad fate of a potted plant to her father: “Pingey died—I just didn’t care for Pingey the way that I should have [. . .] really shouldn’t have used him as an ashtray,” he chuckles softly, but their exchange precedes further misunderstanding and the painful climax of the film, quoted above. “You don’t care,” is the artist’s tearful refrain once the screen fades to black.

What Pozi accomplishes is not a novel form or style of representation, but rather the stark presentation of *absence*. The failure to connect—to care—in *Pingey* is a spectacular separation that mere physical closeness cannot overcome.

At Gandt, *Pingey* was shown on a flat screen in a kitchen-like area, opposite a couch—anticipating warm, embodied viewers. However,

the work also remained digitally available and could be seen in full on the artist’s YouTube channel for the duration of the show. Conceptually, then, the exhibition held space for the possible seated encounter of individual strangers. Yet by shrewdly challenging the convention of better viewing “in real life”—that is, bracketed outside the melee of commercial streaming platforms—Pozi also used the exhibition format to question precisely where real life begins and ends, spatially and psychologically. The approximation of distance is still distance.

[1] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (1967; repr., London: Rebel Press, 2005), 94.

[2] That is, these costs run over and above those resulting from the health care crisis, human loss, and general distress.

[3] Other filmmakers to have materialized intimate family dialogue on screen include Martin Scorsese (*Italoamerican* [1974]), Chantal Akerman (*News from Home* [1977]), and Maggie Lee (*Mommy* [2015]).

Josiane M.H. Pozi (b. 1998, London) is an artist and filmmaker. Her first solo show, *Pingey*, curated by Robert Snowden, took place at Gandt, New York (2020). Previously she has produced and screened work for South London Gallery in conjunction with Liz Johnson Artur’s solo show *If you know the beginning, the end is no trouble* (2019); for the group exhibition *Unorganised Response* at Auto Italia, London (2019); and for the performance *Lifetime* in collaboration with musician Klein at Serpentine Galleries Park Nights, London (2019). Pozi lives and works in London.