Epilogue

The *Aesthetics and Politics of the Online Self* was written before the explosion of the great pandemic of 2020. It was conceived when nobody had experienced the consequent lockdowns, curfews, the development of "tier systems" or red-orange-yellow zones as geographical and mobility designations or, maybe more significantly, the concrete risk of contagion and all that it carries with it due to in person, physical gatherings. What is clear to us now, while still in the thick of the emergency (with not much of a short-term relief in view), is that a new perceptual regime of the reality of the body has followed the appearance of the COVID virus and the contagion it carries with it. While too early to fully take stock of the kind of havoc that this contagion event has wreaked on our sense of self and our subjectivity, it is clear that the centrality of representations and images that were at the core of so-called selfie culture were quickly replaced by a burst in the awareness of our physical vulnerabilities, offering a renewed perspective on the concreteness of face-to-face relationships along with the power and the risks of material shared presence.

If previously voiced common sense interpretations, according to which digital duplication and networked projections were bringing about a crisis and a demise of the organic and the bodily, of the contingency of human creatures and living beings in general, it is by now clear how, to the contrary, the virtual transformations of bodies in their digital counterparts needs to be rethought and reduced to a new awareness. The essays the precede also

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argued for complicating this one-dimensional understanding. The pandemic has simply made it more evident.

*How else to think of how b*odies took center stage in the Black Lives Matter movement and in the protests and upheavals that exploded onto the scene after the images of the brutal murder of George Floyd were shared online or news of Breanna Taylor's assassination circulated. The BLM slogan, "I can't breathe" underlined the needs of the bodies, their vulnerability and the unpredictability that surrounds their survival. Just as "Say her name" resounded with a need for embodied identification. The online circulation of these modern-day lynchings and the raw violence of the police created the necessity of the bodies in the streets. It was Judith Butler, after all, that in her performative theory of the assembly suggested that the precarity of bodies imposes their public performativity as their unique strength, the force of the gesture as more relevant than many utterances, many speeches.

So, the body is vulnerable and its weaknesses require attention. At the same time the Covid emergency made us realize that there is a difference between *real* presence and online presence. At schools, in universities, in conferences, at work, being in presence-remotely online is not the same as being co-present together in the same space. Of course, distance learning, or emergency learning, was a necessity in many contexts in Europe, the US and elsewhere but it showed the irremediable inaccessibility of formative relationships uniquely online, though the infrastructure of distance learning allowed to maintain a connection, when it was impossible to meet for the vigor of the contagion. The more the body was kept at a distance from other bodies the more we realized how much a physical presence was needed to maintain the social and psychical balance in our lives.

Another transformation produced by this chaotic situation was the end of the illusion that reality was not relevant anymore because only the imaginary and the representation was the unique relevant component of reality. The vulnerability of the organic body claimed a new centrality. Only negationists were ready to attribute value to the imaginary of the conspiracy theory. The right-wing supporters were not ready to acknowledge the reality of human vulnerability caused by the virus spillover. They pretend that the contagion was fake, and it was used only to impose the emergency biopolitics regulations to which we have been subjected. They were not ready to accept the contingency of the event, the diffusion of the virus seen as guided for that rationale of governmentality and control.

Another effect on selfie culture during this pandemic was the change of habits related to travel that had consequences on the possibility to post our selfies in different locations. What happens if we are not allowed to move except in the circumscribed spaces of our neighborhoods if not stuck inside our flat with the immobility blues, again? The repetitiveness of the pathways that we were entitled to go through imposed a new communication regime. The empty centers of the cities we live, the lack of live spectacles, concerts, theaters, cinemas, etc., all these limitations have adverse effects on the spectacularism of selfie images, and on self-representation itself. We cannot rely on the surrounding space for guaranteeing the viral force of the digital self-image. The flat was the normal setting of the new selfie culture, which created a completely new frame of representation.

Another consequence of the lockdown was the noteworthy increase in the use of online dating apps. It is difficult to find new partners in the real world, but the lockdown amplified a feeling of solitude, so the online dating was the new setting for the search for a partner. Virtual online acquaintances and real needs of the body are again intertwined in the new pandemic condition.

The psychic balance of our life is menaced by the requirements of protecting ourselves from the virus. Sociality at work, in leisure and pleasure activities, our *free* time, and the time of physical activity and schools are no longer assured. *Stay at home* orders might be a protection from contagion and hold the virus at bay, but they do not protect us from the risks of depression and the psychotic effects of isolation that lurk around the hallway corner.

As the plaformization of existence proceeds apace and it becomes clear that it can only intensify and accelerate the aftermath of the emergency will most likely have to live with its consequences at all levels—physical, material, psychic, and representational. Physical body and online activities are now connected in ways that explode their very significance and distinction, with results that are sometimes contradictory, but imply a reflection on what we have termed as selfie culture. The overwhelming shock and the spiraling of these contradictions will not impact the concrete spaces of the political economy but invest the political and the aesthetic. A new research project in order to understand the long-term changes that the contagion experience will produce in our online habits and attitudes, a new savage journey into the heart of the post-pandemic online self will surely be needed.

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