

## The Weird Vulnerability of Existing in Public Space: Christopher Aque Philipp Hindahl

Christopher Aque describes leaving work on the last day before lockdown, his bag stuffed with toilet paper and N95 masks, and the security guard saying, “See you tomorrow.” Except nothing about tomorrow was self-evident anymore.

This vignette is taken from the text accompanying Aque’s recent exhibition *A void* at Sweetwater, Berlin (2021).<sup>1</sup> Two square basins, set apart on a diagonal line, occupied the middle of the gallery. They each contained two-tiered acrylic receptacles, the top compartment transparent, the bottom one black, covered by a sheet of opaque glass. In the work, the glass appears liquid—although “glass is surprisingly durable,” says Aque over Zoom from New York—and volatile, as if it had attained its shape by melting in place.<sup>2</sup> Water flows through plastic hoses from one basin to another, a constant movement that seems like a take on Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube* (1963–68). Aque adds release and overflow to Haacke’s minimalist setup, and with the title *Double Negative (Swapping Spit)* (2021), he turns the cybernetic sculpture into a model of almost anthropomorphic intimacy. The circulating liquid is invisibly sanitized by UV-C lights similar to the ones used to disinfect surfaces and air ducts in hospitals. Germs perish, yet humans would get skin cancer were they exposed to the light for a long time. The artist complemented the installation with gum bichromate photographic prints, a process discovered soon after the invention of photography. Hues are created by hardening watercolor pigment. “I like the idea of making a photograph that resembles a watercolor painting,” Aque says. UV-C lights make a reappearance: they were used to develop the prints.

In a previous show at Sweetwater—*Red-blooded, White-skinned, and the Blues* (2018)—Aque also incorporated the potentially harmful lights, but wired so that they would only light up when no one was present, alongside a radio transmitter that played indie music from the 2000s. This was mapping not only individual nostalgia, but also the evolving cultural context for self-expression of white masculinity on the political right, which twenty years ago seemed the default mode of alternative culture. Installations that deal with the flow of information, invisibility, and, recently, liquids are but one part of Aque’s practice; the other strand consists of works using cyanotype and other archaic forms of photography to map public spaces in New York.

Is it a coincidence that *A void* opened shortly after the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks? Is it not striking that Aque’s photographs were presented as diptychs in portrait format, in such a way that they resemble the Twin Towers, while the basins were arranged like the World Trade Center’s memorial fountain? In 2021 at Liste, Basel, the artist exhibited a version of the installation with tall black acrylic boxes like plinths, and glass tops shaped like stairs. “Even pulverized,” wrote Jean Baudrillard in his 2002 essay on the Twin Towers, “they leave the form of their absence behind, quite literally so in the double voids of the memorial at the southern tip of Manhattan.”<sup>3</sup> The towers have attained a lasting existence in the realm of images, says the sociologist, whose theories on the unattainability of reality behind endlessly

mediated reproductions now seem like the last gasp of postmodern thought.

It is often said that millennials are haunted by crises, the first of which were the 9/11 attacks, and the latest, COVID-19. At first glance, these events bookend Aque’s recent work. More abstractly, he looks at the building blocks of social and intimate interactions, and the strange overlap that has led to a reconfiguration of public space. Aque’s ghostly photos in *A void* show a body of water and the body of a person, respectively. The diptychs are titled *Ebb* and *Flow*, and their pleasantly washed-out, grainy look does not fully conceal the uneasiness they evoke. Did the depicted people consent? When in May 2021 Aque ventured outside for the first time after months of lockdown, he shot the photos with an iPhone and a GoPro camera. There was a new charge to being in the proximity of other people’s bodies—one that made people more receptive to the physical presence of strangers and the fleeting intimacies in shared spaces.

That disquiet still lingers. The bodies in Aque’s pictures are anonymous—no faces—but they are inserted in systems of surveillance. In the camera’s concealed gaze, there is a certain violence. “I like the weird vulnerability of existing in public space,” he says. Aque already explored these topics in *Idling* (2018). On grainy Super 8, he filmed people sunbathing in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, which is surrounded by a traditionally Black neighborhood that has increasingly been infiltrated by wealthy white newcomers. Parts of it remain a popular cruising ground, invisible to the eye of the camera. Sexual intimacy and the public interlace. “There is something beautiful about intimate desire expanding into big systems,” states Aque.

We are “all watched over by machines of loving grace,” as Richard Brautigan wrote in his poem of the same title, when in the late 1960s he imagined the future as a “cybernetic meadow.”<sup>4</sup> No one knows us like the algorithms of our fitness and dating apps. The public sphere is fragmented and fractal, and for a long time now it has seemed less like the opposite of the private sphere. Instead, the boundary is fluid. Aque’s work deals with many pockets of intimacy, and the briefly secluded romances that claim a spot, then disappear.

- 1 Christopher Aque, press text for *A void*, Sweetwater, Berlin, 2021, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b2ba24d96c76fe2d905dfef/t/61472463b71a997623d8b573/1632052399934/Christopher+Aque\\_A+void\\_text.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b2ba24d96c76fe2d905dfef/t/61472463b71a997623d8b573/1632052399934/Christopher+Aque_A+void_text.pdf).
- 2 All artist quotes, unless otherwise specified, are from a conversation between Christopher Aque and the author, November 11, 2021.
- 3 Jean Baudrillard, “Requiem pour les Twin Towers,” in *Power Inferno* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2002), 18.
- 4 Richard Brautigan, “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace” (1967), in *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, ed. Stewart Brand (Menlo Park, CA: Whole Earth Catalog, 1971), 240.

187 Christopher Aque, *Double Negative (Swapping Spit)* (detail), 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin. Photo: Diana Pfammatter

188 189 Christopher Aque, *Flow*, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin. Photo: Diana Pfammatter

190 191 Christopher Aque, *A void* installation view at Sweetwater, Berlin, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin. Photo: Diana Pfammatter









