

Standing
proud
since 1949

ArtReview



Renzo Martens

Shirin Neshat Haneda Sumiko

Rosa Aiello Lynda Benglis

Freelancer's Delight

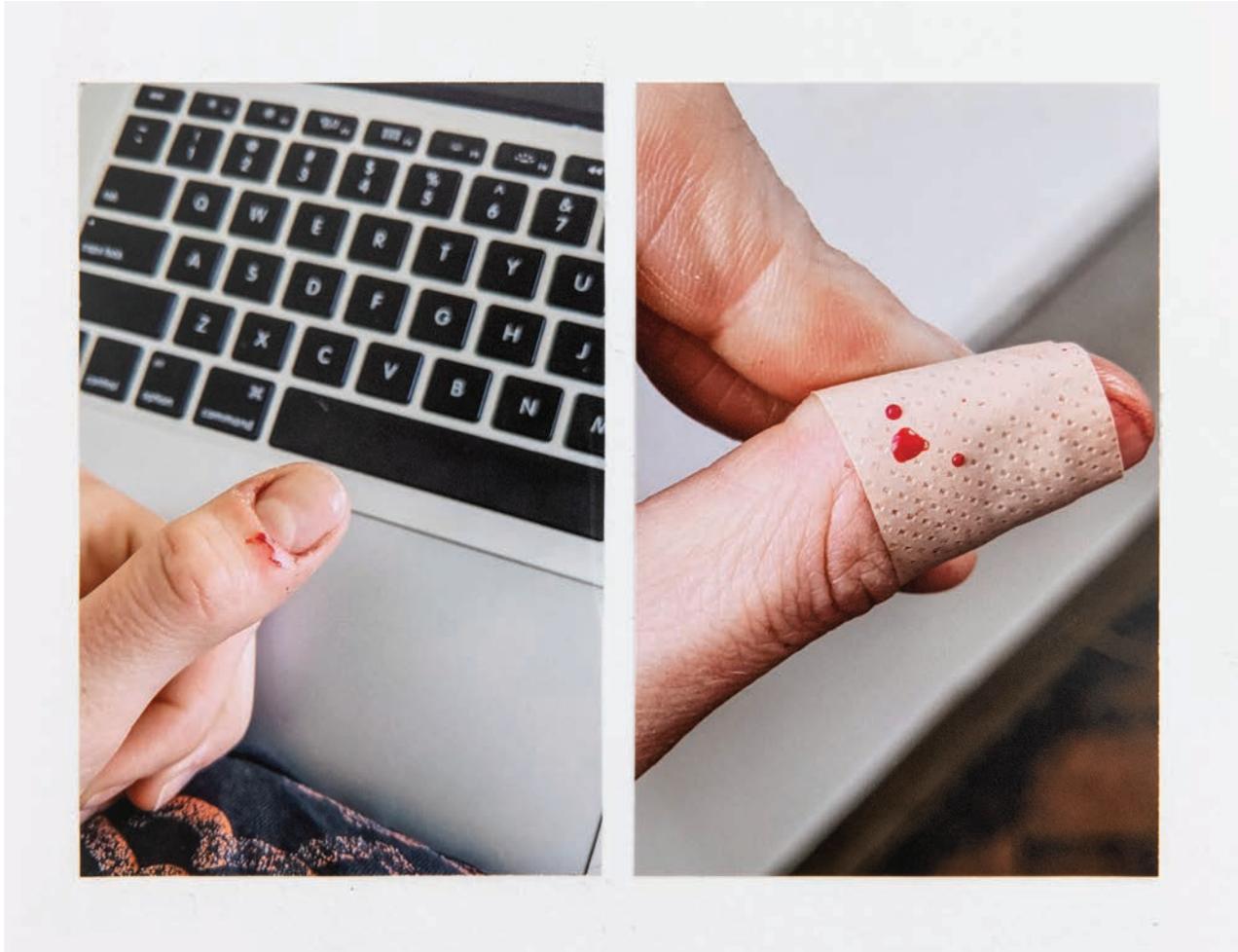


Rosa Aiello's *Caryatid Encounters*

by Chris Fite-Wassilak



Caryatid Encounters (still), 2021, HD video, colour, sound, 47 min



Office Offering, 2021, two c-type prints,
each 15 × 10 cm (framed). Photo: Rob Harris

There are bloody thumbprints dotting the desk, with dark drips on a Post-it note and crimson smudges on the photocopied images of architectural caryatids that cover the desk's surface. A woman clutches at her thumb, alternately covering it with her fingers to quell the bleeding, then nervously biting and picking at it to make it worse. "Of course I want to make you happy," she placates an irate client over the phone, "I know you have other deadlines." The bleeding isn't stopping. "Look," she emphasises, "I really want this. Absolutely. Yes, yes, yes, I can do that. I want to give you what you want. OK, tomorrow, I'll get it to you tomorrow." She ends the call, hangs her head and curses.

This is Helen: she's a freelance advertising producer of some sort, who likes pastel blazers and button-up silk shirts, and lives in a light and airy first floor apartment in Berlin. And she likes cooking, in the pitifully small convection oven that sits on a counter in her grimy kitchen; she once cooked a whole chicken in it, lasagne, birthday cakes and... cookies. She made cookies, would you like a cookie? This is the

incessant refrain throughout Rosa Aiello's taut and nerve-racking 47-minute video *Caryatid Encounters* (2021), as Helen repeatedly practises and delivers her spiel for a series of prospective flatmates: "The wallpaper is all original, and we get lovely light in here in the mornings"; "I absolutely love the views here, you should see it at sunset, it's just magic"; and on.

At the load-bearing centre of the narrative is Helen's current work commission, a video advertisement for Sanssouci Palace, an eighteenth-century royal retreat on the outskirts of Berlin. Standing outside under a set of ornate figurative columns – women with arms upheld to appear as if holding up the building, the titular caryatids – a representative from the palace sets the simple assignment: "We want you to inspire people to come here. Make them fantasise about us. Get them to imagine their most important life events taking place

here. Weddings, conferences, announcements, funerals. You can make them want that, right?" Helen eagerly agrees.

Helen is a model freelancer: relentlessly upbeat, adaptable, available. And tens of thousands of euros in debt. Freelancing is a careful and well-rehearsed precarity, where you can't look what you are (broke and desperate for work) because then you won't get the work you need. And typical of freelance life is Helen's blurring of personal and professional boundaries, where lovers, family, friends and flatmates all need the same well-honed, high-energy pitch as a prospective client. While styled like a quirky HBO drama – imagine some sort of cross between *Six Feet Under* (2001–05) and *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) – it becomes apparent *Caryatid Encounters* is more like a Greek tragedy: despite, or maybe because of all her efforts and energy, we

**Her bleeding thumb from nervous
scratching is just a corporeal reflection
of her sacrifice to the infrastructures
she inadvertently maintains as a woman,
as a worker, as a 'creative'**

know that her attempts at satisfaction – whether work or relationships or finding a flatmate – are doomed. Even before starting work on her advert for Sanssouci (a place, ironically, whose name means 'without worries' in French), she is told she won't have proper access to the

building and will have to work with a limited budget, sabotaged with a smug smile. "I have a job," Helen defensively asserts to her sister over the phone, casually boasting how well paid the gig is and how much she's enjoying it – and then eventually asking to borrow money.

Part of the impact of *Caryatid Encounters* is its unrelenting precision in portraying the theatre and anxieties of freelance life. Despite freelancing being an increasingly common way of working, particularly in the piecemeal realm of artistic and creative endeavours, its mechanisms – the constant performing of a professional self and submissions to chance – are often hidden away unshared. Media theorist Gary Hall, in *The Uberification of the University* (2016), describes the type of individual shaped by the gig economy, each having to act as 'freelance microenterprises': 'self-preoccupied, self-disciplining' people who have 'lost the ability to plan and control their own futures.



Caryatid Encounters (still), 2021, HD video, colour, sound, 47 min

Consequently, they remain personable and positive, even when their way of life is rendered poor and precarious.’ Which seems to describe Helen to a T, if a bit perfunctorily; for any freelancer (ie, most artists and those involved in the ‘creative economy’, like art critics), that’s also pretty-long-ago ingested and rehearsed to the point of being self-evident. Which is maybe why Aiello’s video feels so unsettling, as it takes the self-preoccupied, self-disciplined state as a mood, a scab to pick at. Writer and ethnographer Heather Berg’s more recent *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* (2021) is more insightful on the slippery nature of freelance work and exploitation, taking pornographic acting as a site to explore precarity, affective labour and the contradictions of the late-capitalist refrain to ‘do what you love’. One chapter explores the issue of authenticity, and the way that porn actors are meant to be believably seen to be enjoying their labour on camera. Berg opens the chapter with a reference to a video by actress and podcaster Sovereign Syre, who proposes the “the porn performer as a quantum mechanic”. Citing the thought experiment of Schrödinger’s cat (which was proposed to allegorically illustrate the paradoxical tendencies in quantum mechanics, wherein a cat trapped in a box could be simultaneously both alive and dead), Syre poses porn work as a quantum state: “The script, the performers, the setting, everything about it is false, and yet you’re expected to generate an authentic experience, like the orgasms are meant to be real... and the sex that’s happening is real... [Porn performers] are expected to perform two functions at the same time, to be incredibly theatrical and at the same time incredibly authentic... What’s considered a good performer in this context is actually someone that isn’t performing but in fact having real experiences.” This quantum state seems to reflect on Helen’s predicament, and by extension all those working under precarious gig conditions: a state in which she both does and doesn’t make a living from her work, does and doesn’t love what she does, can and cannot just be herself.

Freelancing is a careful and well-rehearsed precarity, where you can’t look what you are (broke and desperate for work) because then you won’t get the work you need

So what can she, or we, do about this? In researching her ad for Sanssouci, she surrounds herself with images of caryatids, covering her walls and desk, becoming drawn into one of the stories told about the origins of the Ancient Greek architectural feature, where the women of Karyai were paraded through the town after its capture and cast into stone as a threatening reminder. “They weren’t just carrying the weight of the structures,” Helen vents to a friend over for dinner, “but eternally carrying the weight of maintaining the social order.” Like most effective tragic figures, Helen becomes aware of her fate, sensing through these female columns her own role in supporting the structures that have caught her in this relentless performance: “Architecture is like a warning,” she says, prophetically, but one too late to heed. Her bleeding thumb from nervous scratching is just a corporeal reflection of her sacrifice to the infrastructures she inadvertently maintains as a woman, as a worker, as a ‘creative’.

And yet, perhaps in an all-too-apt reflection of freelance life, *Caryatid Encounters* offers no resolution; it starts all over again in an uneven loop of stymied apartment tours and manically cheery grovelling for more work, a cycle that seems frustratingly inevitable. If there’s any way out, it’s a problem that’s left to us. At the installation of the video in London’s Arcadia Missa gallery this past summer, after watching the video you’d pass by the sculpture *Welcome to her Counting House* (2021), a plinth topped with two tea towels covered in uneven columns of cookies. They look unappetising: dried out, crummy and burnt. And of course, as an artwork, you’re not meant to actually touch them, much less eat them; but it’s presented as if taking a cookie might at least diminish these towers, might start to dismantle the architecture. Aiello poses a possible state where you both do and don’t eat the cookie: either way, you’re screwed. ar

Chris Fite-Wassilak is a London-based critic and author



Caryatid Encounters (still), 2021, HD video, colour, sound, 47 min



Welcome to her Counting House, 2021, cookies, tea towels,
plinth, dimensions variable. Photo: Rob Harris
all images Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa, London

CRITICS' PICKS

- All Cities
- Basel
- Bologna
- Cincinnati
- Dubai
- Hamburg
- Indianapolis
- Johannesburg
- Leeds
- Melbourne
- Miami
- Minneapolis
- New York
- Rome
- Toronto
- Zurich



Rosa Aiello, *The Victim* (detail), 2019, 28 digital prints with pearl paper, double-sided tape.

MEXICO CITY

Rosa Aiello

LODOS

Turín 38-B Colonia Juárez

May 9–July 13, 2019

As an adaptation of a Patricia Highsmith story, Rosa Aiello’s video *The Coquette*, 2018, promises to end with murder and without justice. The twenty-four-minute satire noir follows a doomed young woman who flirts with

and eventually spurns a suitor in an arc delivering us to the seemingly inevitable: Yvonne is brought to her demise by two resentful admirers, to whom the judge grants lenient to zero sentences (because they went to the same prep school—classic!).

A backstory describes how, at the age of ten, Yvonne lost her virginity to a thirty-year-old man; her mother still blames her for seducing and ruining him. Even so, in Aiello’s rendering, Yvonne is far from being an entirely sympathetic character and seems to lift tactics straight from Robert Greene’s book *The Art of Seduction* for her would-be lovers. Excerpts from the bestseller’s two dozen chapters, including “Appear to Be an Object of Desire: Create Triangles” (chapter four) and “Disarm Through Strategic Weakness and Vulnerability” (chapter thirteen), are referenced in a photography series of suburban roadsides, “Seduction (Coventry Hills),” 2019, installed on a false wall outside *The Coquette*. Like Yvonne’s killer, the landscapes are both forgettable and menacing.

It’d be easy to condemn a step-by-step manual for manipulating desire, but Aiello is more interested in how such methods become naturalized. *The Victim*, 2019, includes a listicle of reasons to perform the big O (“to please partner,” “to not hurt partner’s feelings”), juxtaposed with photographs in which doe-eyed little girls first look dazzled, then crumple into tears, as they get their ears pierced at Claire’s. As Highsmith herself well knew, women’s stories are so often rape and murder stories because few other narratives convince (well, if that) observers of the many ways in which we are fucked.

— Hiji Nam



Building Blocks: Rosa Aiello and Patricia L. Boyd

The artists' two-person show at London's Cell Project Space lays bare the latent economic structures that condition our lives

A

BY AMY BUDD IN REVIEWS | 21 MAR 19

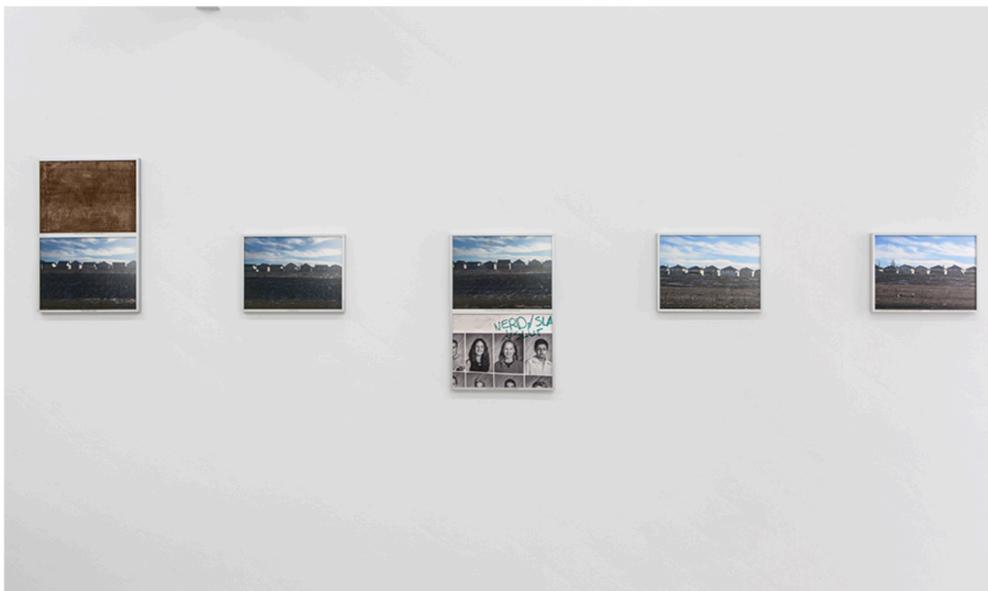


Featured in
Issue 202



Modules can be described as individual components used to construct a more complex structure such as an item of furniture, a building or, perhaps, even an art exhibition. This modular premise of extraction and addition underlines Rosa Aiello's and Patricia L. Boyd's collaborative exhibition 'Joins' at Cell Project Space, where as described in the exhibition handout, sculpture, video, sound, circuitry and photographs are recombined and arranged to antithetically 'bring things together in an attempt to pull them apart'.

Two L-shaped temporary walls occupy opposite ends of the gallery, creating distinct corners to recall the modularity of domestic space, further emphasized in Rosa Aiello's motion-triggered sound piece *Untitled (Blasey Ford)* (2019), which lists the areas of a house ('the stairwell, the living room, the bedroom, the bathroom in close proximity...') named in Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford's testimonial against Brett Kavanaugh. This source material suggests the unsettling consequences configured space can have over lived experience. A caption for an adjacent artwork resonates here, explaining, 'The way the rooms of the house are arranged determines the flow of events,' specifically underpinning *Progression (Harvest Hills – Coventry Hills)* (2019) a photographic series extending across a gallery wall. Blurred images of detached houses photographed at high speed depict a journey between two neighbouring suburbs in Alberta, Canada, both built in the 1990s. Innumerable rows of homogenous houses dominate the landscape while captions allude to the conditioning influence of design over human behaviour.



Rosa Aiello, *Progression (Harvest Hills – Coventry Hills)*, 2019, digital print, photo rag paper, acetate film, glue, upholstery fabric, aluminium frames, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Cell Project Space, London; photograph: Rob Harris

In an adjacent display, translucent yellow- and brown-flecked sculptures are recessed into a gallery wall. These seemingly beeswax moulds are, in fact, negative impressions of office furniture, specifically the inside armrest of a ubiquitous Herman Miller Aeron office chair, cast by Boyd from waste cooking grease sourced from a facility that collects it from restaurants before it is cleaned, resold and transformed into fuel. Boyd further intervenes into the flow of goods by purchasing her cast object, 'America's best-selling chair', from a liquidation auction of a Bay Area technology company undergoing intensive financial restructuring. The resulting grease sculptures are abject compounds of 'exhausted' commodities extracted from their circulation routes and repurposed to expose the dispensability of material culture and sublimation of leisure and labour. The congealed materiality of Boyd's *Aeron Armrest I – XII* recalls poet Keston Sutherland's speculation on the idea of *Gallerte* in Marx's *Capital* (1867). In 'Marx in Jargon' (2008), Sutherland reflects on the historical misunderstanding of 'abstract human labour' as a 'mere *congelation* of human labour'. He instead insists on Marx's specific use of *Gallerte* as an essentially untranslatable (and disgusting) idea to describe 'abstract human labour' in terms of a commodity bought and eaten by his 19th Century readers: gelatine. As such, Boyd's gelatinous sculptures offer a gruesome image of human labour: congealed into a mess of grease and animal waste, devoured by capitalism.

Two-person exhibitions often struggle to negotiate the conscious pairing of distinct practices, yet here both artists work intuitively to present mutual lines of enquiry in tandem. A list of *Terms* (2019) distributed from a cardboard box stowed at the back of the gallery allows shared ideas to coalesce. This collaborative, alphabetized index generously signposts a range of critical motifs underpinning the exhibition, defining obvious references such as Corner, Grease and Grid to opaque reflections, as in *Stuffing* and *Dentistry*. As a glossary, *Terms* is a linchpin and playfully invites viewers to make associative readings between the artworks in the exhibition. In this sense, 'Joins' breaks down concepts, allowing latent economic structures conditioning housing, labour relations and commodity exchange to be laid bare.

Rosa Aiello and Patricia L. Boyd, 'Joins' was on view at Cell Project Space, London, from 1 February until 17 March 2019.



Rosa Aiello, *A River In It*, 2015, video, color, sound, 9 minutes 41 seconds.

Rosa Aiello

ELI PING FRANCES PERKINS

“Just walk in a straight line. . . . Go ahead, forward. . . . Proceed straight ahead, go on, go on. . . .” Though sometimes indistinct, at one point dropping to an intimate but distorted whisper, the voice-over in Rosa Aiello’s video *A River in It*, 2015, doesn’t let up for more than a few seconds of the work’s nearly ten-minute duration. Directing its unseen subject (the viewer?) ever onward, it varies in tone from reassuring (“Whoops, careful. . . . It’s OK, go ahead”) to official (“At this time, keep going straight”) to impatient (“Don’t stop! Why are you stopping?”) to bullying (“You have no choice, just do it, do as I say!”). Demanding that we press ever ahead, it keeps us on constantly shifting ground.

Accompanying this narration, voiced by artist Olga Pedan, is an ominous mix of other sounds—regular breathing; a repeated low piano note; a slow, rattling beat; and the occasional deep bass tone. Their combination generates a creeping dread, which the video’s imagery does nothing to dispel. A moment of darkness gives way to a shot of a distant roaring campfire, which the camera approaches unsteadily, as if its operator is trudging across a field, eventually getting so close that the flames fill the screen, suffusing it in a white-orange glow. On one of the camera’s several approaches to the flames, the image is layered over a blurry black-and-white design; on another, it is interrupted by splatters of paint on the lens, which partially obscure the scene beneath murky color.

In the press release, Aiello makes clear that the form and content of *A River in It* are directly related to those of Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson’s *Swamp*, quoting Holt’s characterization of that 1971 work as using the camera to address perceptual limits via a consciously problematic mise-en-scène: “Verbal direction cannot easily be followed. As the reeds crash against the camera lens blocking vision and forming continuously shifting patterns, confusion ensues.” Yet as Aiello also points out, *A River in It* is set in a virtual, partly animated space, making the quality of that confusion less environmental, more subjective.

The divergent origins of Aiello’s work and its model feel critical, marking a shift in method from what one might call an experimental-documentary mode to one rooted in the conscious and transparent manipulation of situations and the media employed to represent them. Holt really did hack her way through a New Jersey swamp under Smithson’s unforgiving direction in a study of what he dubbed “calculated aimlessness,” but Aiello stays warm and dry in the editing suite, making use of technology to create a similarly unsettling experience. And while in *Swamp* we hear Holt and Smithson engaging in a kind of conversation, *A River in It* features just one voice, a reflection, perhaps, of the atomization effected by society’s organization around remote digital communication.

Yet though the structure of *A River in It* is complex compared with *Swamp*’s single, long, unedited shot, the journey is hardly a smooth one. If anything, the abrupt cuts, awkward superimpositions, and murky sound of Aiello’s video make its precursor appear relatively straightforward, if not quite slick. The questions raised by the later work—Who is doing the directing, and why? Where exactly are we supposed to be? Can we imagine a resolution to this peculiar drama?—add a disturbing narrative element to Holt and Smithson’s comparatively formalist experiment, not simply “updating” it, but relocating it to a contemporary interzone, darkened and untrustworthy.

—Michael Wilson