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Chapter Thirty Six

# Context Collapse

EL Putnam



Context collapse” is a phrase used in digital culture to describe how the boundaries of different communication contexts collapse on social media, as personal, professional, and family spheres coalesce on these virtual platforms. danah boyd coined the phrase to describe how “technology complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other” (Marwick and boyd 2). boyd and Alice Marwick analyze how audiences that have been delegated to different circles of relations offline—resulting in different presentations of self depending on context—are now merged into a single context in social media. Public health restrictions implemented around the globe in response to the COVID-19 pandemic—which have meant the closure of schools, workplaces, and other public spaces as people are encouraged to stay home—have introduced another type of context collapse.

Unlike the online phenomenon, this context collapse is not virtual; personal, professional, and family spheres are now coexisting in the same time and physical space. Although virtual instances of context collapse are difficult to manage and require strategic impression management to keep professional and personal presentations distinctive, the context collapse of COVID-19 is an impossible negotiation of reproductive politics. In response, my artistic practice has become a means of coping with the impact of this context collapse while my work as a performance artist that engages with digital technologies has also been forced to adapt. Like numerous other artists working in performance, I have been experimenting with livestreaming.

In this chapter, I present a series of video stills from these livestreamed performances, discussing the context of how they were produced and how they relate to my ongoing interests in developing a shared aesthetics of interruption of the maternal and digital technologies, which the current pandemic is bringing to the fore. I also talk about how my practice is helping me cope with maternal ambivalence under these circumstances.



Internet livestreaming rose to prominence with the advent of online platforms, such as Justin.tv in 2007 and Twitch in 2011, which could accommodate the technical demands and complexities associated with the medium. It quickly became popular with the e-sports and video gaming communities (Taylor 6). With the development of smartphones, social media livestreaming has also been used for civic activism and engagement as well as a means of broadcasting protests and social justice actions, as well as capturing capturing the often devastating footage of police brutality and murder (Costanza-Chock 117-18). However, for the arts and performance, livestreaming has been treated as an inferior substitute to “in real life” (IRL) events.

Since COVID-19 lockdowns and public health regulations restricted in-person activities—resulting in the closure of many art and cultural spaces including galleries and theatres—performing virtually gained greater acceptance, as it became the most feasible option to present live action, since live video broadcast phenomenologically resembles in-person presence to a degree.

I wanted to create livestreamed performances that played with its parameters as a medium, so I experimented with chroma keying. My techniques were inspired by the work of Irish artist Laura O'Connor, who has developed numerous livestreamed performances in which she lays video over her body in poignant, feminist responses to the biopolitics of reproduction in Ireland (Putnam 17-9). In the first performance I livestreamed, I applied green paint to my face, keyed out so a video of my daughter playing with dandelions appeared as the paint layer thickens.<sup>1</sup> In other videos, I interacted with a large piece of blue fabric, keyed out so the video screen becomes a material that I manipulate through a haptic folding. I push and pull the digital image as it becomes a tangible object in the virtual realm, constructing a reality that is entangled yet different from my physical presence.

When I began livestreaming, I quickly came up against the material limitations of inferior technological infrastructure. Our home in the Irish countryside, right at the border with Northern Ireland, had very poor internet connection, as broadband was not available in our area. Even after reducing the quality of the video as much as possible, my streams were regularly interrupted by dropped frames and frozen images. I found these formal challenges related to a topic that I have been researching through my artistic practice and scholarship for several years now—the shared aesthetics of interruption of the maternal and digital technologies. I define the aesthetics of interruption as the sensorial quality of art and media that emerges from interruption, which is similar to the state of the mother as she cares for a dependent child or the formal characteristics of digital technology in the gap, glitch, or lag (Putnam 14-5).

In particular, I am interested in how maternal and digital interruptions intersect through art and aesthetic encounters. These qualities are manifest in the *Context Collapse* livestreamed performances through the lagging images, gaps in action, and pixelated compositions that resulted from poor internet connectivity. This intersection also

emerges from the fact that I performed these actions at night after my children went to sleep, meaning there was always a risk of being interrupted by a child crying out for more breastmilk or wanting comfort after a disturbing dream. The content of the work, which involved overlaying videos I created during lockdown with my daughters, dealt with the ongoing interruptions of motherwork and the challenges of producing creative work while in constant close contact with small children. During lockdown, I aimed to produce one performance a week and I presented them over the livestreaming platform Periscope, which links to Twitter. I would not announce when they would take place because I was never certain I would be able to follow through with any scheduled actions, as it depended on my daughters going to sleep.

Through this work, I take advantage of the affordances of livestreaming that are often overlooked or neglected, specifically the distance, difference, and separation of context that the virtual connection attempts to bridge (Hunter 284), as opposed to relying on how the technology alters perceptions of space and time. The use of chroma keying points to the construction and mediation of the virtual performance of the livestream, as moving frames collapse but do not coalesce. I invite a sense of ambiguity and introduce confusion, as I provide no textual description about my actions or the content of the video. I disable the capacity of viewers to interact through text or likes, intentionally distancing myself from the online audience.





The intentional confusion the work invites relates to my struggles with maternal ambivalence, which was heightened in the period of lockdown. Barbara Almond defines maternal ambivalence as “that mixture of loving and hating feelings that all mothers experience toward their children and the anxiety, shame, and guilt that the negative feelings engender in them” (Almond 2), which she describes as stemming from conflicts between the needs of the child and that of the mother. The circumstances of the COVID-19 lockdown intensified the conditions that provoke ambivalence through the context collapse of roles, space, and time, turning the challenging circumstances of raising small children into insurmountable tasks. Rozika Parker argues how instead of resisting or ignoring maternal ambivalence, it can invite creative mothering, which sparks “the impulse to give, understand, construct and mend” (Parker III).

I translated these actions into my artistic practice, first through the shooting of videos with my daughters—where the act of performing to camera together with them became gestures of artist-mothering—and then through the incorporation of these videos into my livestreamed solo performances. In the performances, creative mothering is abstracted through artistic negotiation and embodied processing of emotion. At the same time, these videos and performances enable me to entertain a speculative moment regarding the contradictions inherent to my relationship with my children, which Sarah LaChance Adams argues is a significant means of coping with and coming to understand maternal ambivalence (141). In this manner, the series

responds to my experiential compression of the COVID-19 lockdown as an attempt to make sense of such extraordinary times. The performances function as acts of agency to counter the incessant grinding down of such an exhaustive state of domestic context collapse while acknowledging and engaging with the interconnectedness of human beings, both online and IRL.

## Endnotes

1. To “key out” in video means to mask a section of the image based on colour. Chroma keying enables two or more moving image sequences to occupy the same frame at the same time. In the videos I produced, the parts of my face where green paint is applied are made transparent so the underlying video of my daughter is visible. As I applied and thickened the face paint, the underlying video became more visible. Alternatively referred to as “green screen,” it is commonly used cinema and television, including meteorological reports, where it enables a meteorologist to stand in front of an animated weather map.

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