

This Could Be Us: Marina Sula Attilia Fattori Franchini

“From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.”¹

I am thinking about the work of Marina Sula while glaring out of a taxi. The city I have just arrived to from a banal, yet so familiar, airport merges with my own image reflected in the window. Two spheres, the private and the public, appear to disperse into one another. I am looking but not seeing.

Marina Sula’s practice offers a transitional gaze, exploring the impact of architectural spaces, objects, and perceptual phenomena on the production of subjectivity while also reflecting on standardization, production, and consumption, both social and artistic. Is there any objectivity in vision? Sula is interested in the politics of the image, critically acknowledging that images are not mere depictions of the real, but active influencers of reality. Characterized by a constant push and pull between representation and objecthood, and employing materials diffused in shopping malls and store windows, the work finds balance in concealment and disguise through surfaces. In Sula’s practice, images seek tactility, and objects seduction.

Since 2015 the artist has been making sculptural benches, their structures of welded steel, and the seating imagined as a glass-covered container or surface. As Diana Fuss and Joel Sanders defend in their inquisitive piece “An Aesthetic Headache: Notes from the Museum Bench” (2012): “The bench’s very presence, when acknowledged, remind us that the act of spectatorship might be not as disembodied, nor the gallery space as neutral, as we still commonly assume.”² The work *domestic audiences, or Continuation* (2019) exhibited at Belvedere 21, Vienna, humorously layers two rusty sickles—the agricultural tool symbolic of workers’ rights—on soft Tempur mattress—an intelligent material that supposedly improves sleep quality—subtly provoking via a juxtaposition of Socialist iconography with neoliberal doctrines of self-improvement through technology and consumerism.

Sula’s photographic output, shot on her iPhone, can be described as heterotopic, a term coined by Michel Foucault to define cultural, urban, and institutional spaces that deviate their original function.³ Airports, fitness studios, doctors’ offices, restaurants, hotels, and the objects that characterize these spaces recur in the artist’s oeuvre. A seat belt left loose (*Untitled [Liff]* [2019]); a passerby reading a letter (*Untitled [Letter]* [2019], part of the installation *Warten* at *viennacontemporary* in 2019); and a silver tray holding the leftovers of a meal (*this could be us* [2019], shown as part of the artist’s solo exhibition *I’m sorry, I can’t, don’t hate me* at Galerie Gabriele Senn, Vienna, in 2019) are often cut or fragmented and realized in small sizes to simulate the everyday experience of memory recollection, storing portions of the encountered world. Some larger-scale images are UV-printed on Plexiglas—a technique borrowed from advertising—and contoured by steel frames. Their cold appearance,

willfully clashing with their intimate depictions, recalls the sculptural investigations of the benches. We peer into the privacy of a hotel room in *Untitled (Intercontinental)* (2019), our view extended by a window onto the Viennese horizon, or a children’s physiotherapy studio in *Untitled (Therapy)* (2019), reflecting the potentiality of the action, or the lack of it, into a mirror. We find ourselves striving to know the personal stories behind those moments.

The work *The phantom moves* (2020), exhibited at Kunstverein Kevin Space, Vienna (2020), extends the artist’s research into how freedom and individuality are formed under neoliberalism. Taken by the artist on a long-distance flight, the image is personal and generic at once. An ordinary security chain is installed on the acrylic box protecting the photograph—a symbolic, but also potentially operative, value placer. Sula’s first institutional solo show, *You may never know what’s causing all the traffic* at CIAP Kunstverein, Genk, Belgium (2021), was conceived as a site-specific installation composed of a series of images displayed in self-standing acrylic boxes and outdoor benches. Set as a language game, a vehicle to tell a story as seen from multiple, non-aligning perspectives, the exhibition extended the artist’s interest in sites of transition and transaction. In preparation for it, Sula gathered a large archive of images of everyday objects: seats, dustbins, laundry baskets. These functional objects, deprived of their human counterparts, became affective, impregnated with emotional qualities. Standing vertically, sometimes abruptly cut, their fragmentation suggested a dystopic post-world. Some of the boxes were personalized with a lock on the backside, or a piece of tape, marking them as unique yet imperfect. They were riddles in which meaningful resolution was precious and needed to be protected. Projection happened naturally, as the installation unfolded complexity with a mirroring effect: this could be us.

- 1 Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces,” trans. Robert Hurley, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1999), 2:178. Originally published as “Des espace autres,” *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (October 1984).
- 2 Diana Fuss and Joel Sanders, “An Aesthetic Headache: Notes from the Museum Bench,” in *Interiors*, ed. Johanna Burton, Lynne Cooke, and Josiah McElheny (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012), 66.
- 3 Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 3.

213 Marina Sula, *Untitled (Therapy)*, 2019. Courtesy: Galerie Gabriele Senn, Vienna. Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com

214 Marina Sula, *Untitled (Letter)*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist

215 Marina Sula, *Warten* installation view at *viennacontemporary*, Vienna, 2019. Courtesy: Galerie Gabriele Senn, Vienna. Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com

216 Marina Sula, *You may never know what’s causing all the traffic* installation view at CIAP Kunstverein, Genk, 2021. Courtesy: Galerie Gabriele Senn, Vienna. Photo: Michiel De Cleene

217 Marina Sula, *You may never know what’s causing all the traffic* (detail), installation view at CIAP Kunstverein, Genk, 2021. Courtesy: Galerie Gabriele Senn, Vienna. Photo: Michiel De Cleene





