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ESSAY



## Mask Aesthetics: Prophylaxis, Post-Digital Arts, and Reimagining Vulnerable Selves

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### ABSTRACT

Affirming masks' proven efficacy in preventing the airborne transmission of COVID-19, this paper seeks to understand face covering during the pandemic from a different but complementary angle: that is, as a deeply relational and thoroughly multimodal practice. Drawing on concepts of automediality, crip and feminist theories of affect and embodiment, biopolitics, and pandemic temporalities, I analyze artists' mask-themed projects created during the first two years of the pandemic across forms including sculpture, performance, digital photography, social media, online visual diaries, and mutual aid projects. Through theoretical, analytical, and self-reflexive writing, the discussion draws out the shifting, contingent meanings of masks; their relation to currents of power, affect, and memory; and their implications for selfhood, community, and solidarity. Artists' automedial projects show how masks have become integral to the life of the body, the upheaval of our lives, the losses we are mourning, the overlapping injustices we must fight, and the stories we tell about what it was and is like to be in our situations and to be connected to one another during the pandemic.

### KEYWORDS

Automedia; visual arts; vulnerability; COVID-19

### Introduction: Masks, Not a War but a Practice

When I was finally allowed to visit my grandmother in her long-term care home in Hamilton, Ontario, in July 2021, after an almost two-year gap, she recognized me with affection, though not by name. Gramma also made it clear she was not thrilled by my mask, commenting, “get that blue thing off your face.” My mother and I rode it out and kept our faces covered: it

was the condition of our being there with our loved one, as safely as we could, in person. Midway, we took a masked group selfie in the courtyard, our two masked faces flanking her uncovered one, smiling at one another's images on the iPhone screen and looking up into the afternoon sun.

In a March 2023 article on the current state of scientific research and public health communication, Zeynep Tufekci reviews existing meta-analyses and clarifies the prophylactic utility of masks in preventing airborne viral transmission: "Masks are a tool, not a talisman or a magic wand. They have a role to play when used appropriately and consistently at the right times. They should not be dismissed or demonized."<sup>1</sup> Tufekci's instruction is sensible and future-oriented, hoping to hold open an objective assessment and prepare for the possibility that masks might need to be mandated again should another novel virus or pathogen begin to circulate. Arguably, however, an inclusive, progressive politics cannot ignore or take for granted the complex, charged affectivity of masks.

While emergency mask mandates are no longer in force as I draft this essay (in June 2023), face coverings continue to be recommended for use in crowded, close-contact settings and are more widely worn across the globe than they were before the pandemic. Masks continue, too, to function as a ubiquitous signifier,<sup>2</sup> one that we have yet to absorb or reckon with. Promoted not only as prophylactic but as a symbol of "social solidarity and altruism,"<sup>3</sup> masks have become complexly layered metonyms, referencing the COVID-19 virus itself, the mass illness and death it has caused, and the effects of the pandemic on social institutions and everyday interactions. As Philippe Theophanidis has pointed out, "One of the main characteristics of the virus remains its invisibility, which quickly spurred a rhetoric of the invisible enemy": masks have bridged this representational gap, but in so doing generated a visual repertoire fraught with "intrinsic ambivalence," "the uncanny," and "an excess of politics."<sup>4</sup> Committed to thinking carefully about these turbulent associations, this essay takes up artists' mask-themed projects to interpret masks as an everyday practice, an image repertoire, and a site of ethical and political reflection. Affirming mask efficacy, I seek to understand the topic from a different but complementary angle: that is, as a deeply relational and thoroughly multimodal practice.

Before turning to theoretical and artistic points of reference, it is important to grapple with the broader terrain of visibility, sensory perception, and power in which masks and our pandemic "life" and "lives" more broadly have come to mean. Consider, for example, masks' prominence in Arundhati Roy's "The Pandemic Is a Portal" in the *Financial Times*, which highlighted April 2020 healthcare sector PPE shortages in the United States and India, alongside press images showing the cloth face coverings

improvised by migrant workers forced by the state to flee New Delhi on short notice, under threat of violence.<sup>5</sup> Weeks later, in May 2020, Sarah Lewis noted the echoing absence of images of COVID deaths in the public sphere,<sup>6</sup> and Nathan Jurgenson flagged that the pandemic is at risk of being “misremembered” as a serene time of creativity and coziness.<sup>7</sup> Hoping to counter such suppressive tendencies, in a blog entry on “Whiteness, Visuality and the Virus,” Nicholas Mirzoeff included an early image of a masked US healthcare worker confronting the “white reaction” of antilockdown protesters, reworking Roy’s idea of the portal as a “gateway” between worlds to call for breaking the fantasy of white immunity and insisting upon an ethic of “relation not exclusion.”<sup>8</sup> If Mirzoeff pushed back on overt public displays of white supremacy, Jasmine Zine drew attention to masks’ construction within liberal thought and visual iconography as signifiers of “social responsibility,” a self-flattering construction disturbingly contingent on the scapegoating of Asian, Black, and Muslim mask wearers.<sup>9</sup> As Zine underscores, Western visibility distributes and denies citizenship unjustly, along racial lines: “When worn by an Asian body, the mask no longer signifies protection from possible contagion; it is part of a repertoire of phenotypical markers and cultural signs that metonymically transforms Asian bodies in to the source of contagion.”<sup>10</sup> Looking back at these early accounts tells us that, if masks emerged as a ubiquitous signifier in the early weeks and months of the pandemic, their meanings were both radically unstable and thoroughly implicated in racial oppression, and thus face covering could never be a simple salve for bodily and social vulnerability.

As they became increasingly required and contested in everyday life, masks quickly proliferated on both personal and institutional social media accounts as part of the uptick of at-home creativity during the lockdowns.<sup>11</sup> While the range of creative mask projects is enormous and includes a plethora of community archives, this article focuses on artists’ projects. I concentrate on artistic remediations of mask imagery both for ethical reasons related to their clearer public-facing status, but also because they engage in visual philosophical work that reimagines bodily and psychic boundaries and aims to contribute to public memory in critical ways. Centering artistic and activist projects, I ask: What kinds of selves do we craft/have we crafted through masking—that is, through wearing and making masks, and digitally imaging our masked faces? What affective dynamics and temporal flows shape masking? What kinds of fault lines and fractures must we navigate in the process, and what are the possibilities for doing so in good relation?<sup>12</sup>

I will argue that, in digitally mediated (self-) portraiture by visual artists of the early 2020s, mask wearing manifests as an embodied, enacted,

visual-material rhetoric. Artists' projects attend to the material and affective complexities of masked embodiments, dwelling on problems of discomfort, disgust, and ambivalence; negotiating relations of proximity and distance; and issuing powerful calls for creativity, solidarity, and witnessing. Drawing on concepts of automediality, crip and feminist theories of affect and embodiment, biopolitics, and pandemic temporalities, I analyze forms including sculpture, performance, digital photography, social media, online visual diaries, and mutual aid projects. In the paper's first section, I critically explore key theoretical precedents, and propose that, in the context of COVID-19, masking is best understood, following Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, as an "automedia" practice, a creative, processual mediation of life,<sup>13</sup> through which we can learn different ways of attending to our own and others' vulnerabilities as well as reckoning with oscillating and uncomfortable affects. The second section analyzes how vulnerable selves are reimagined through experimentation with form in a selection of artists' creative-critical mask projects that have circulated online. Along the way, I offer occasional memory fragments as an indispensable aspect of knowing/feeling the topic, not to make my lived experience of mask wearing during the pandemic representative, but to hold close the relational, everyday, and material dimensions.

### **Together, Apart: Rematerializing Masks**

A key conceptual premise of this paper is that masks are not only prophylactic, polysemous, and politically fraught but also an "identity technology" at once semiotic, material, visual, and digital.<sup>14</sup> Interested in masks' circulation within contemporary digital environments, I follow Jurgenson's May 2020 observation that "With mask selfies, like any other selfie, sometimes they are taken, shared, and kept as a reminder of what I look like right now, and future-me might be especially curious about what it was like to be me during this pandemic, to have some evidence that I was here during all of this."<sup>15</sup> On this view, digital self-portraiture can facilitate retrospective life analysis and reflection, making it a possible counter to the dividing force of what Nadine Chan characterizes as the pandemic's "digital rush," a space-time fracture through which unequal "digital lifeworlds proliferated exponentially."<sup>16</sup> Everyday mask wearing serves a mnemonic purpose in another way as well: it is a present-time practice through which we remind ourselves of the risks attendant on the proximity of differently vulnerable bodies in shared space and mitigate those risks.

As Jurgenson's use of the plural reflexive pronoun "ourselves" implies, the significance of mask practices and their archives is at once personal and communal. However, masks have had a problematic reputation and

function within both auto/biography studies and biopolitical theory, and thus may not initially seem to present promising grounds for a relational politic. Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-facement" advanced a view of life writing as a play of tropes rather than a genre, with the implication that there is no true self or reliable documentary trace available to ground individuals' public identities.<sup>17</sup> Life narration is, in this deconstructive frame, a masking premised on absence, on an inexorable drift toward (the) death (of meaning). Feminist scholars of auto/biography studies, including Marlene Kadar and Leigh Gilmore, have long pushed back against this idea of life writing as reducible to *prosopopoeia*, generating robust theories of autobiographical discourse, life traces, critical practice, and testimony as an ethical and political counterweight.<sup>18</sup> Masks are a touchstone for theorists of biopower, too, fundamental to genealogies of the citizen-self from Roman times to modern liberalism. Whether literal (coverings) or figurative (public personae), fabricated faces stand in the way of what Roberto Esposito terms an "affirmative biopolitics."<sup>19</sup> That is, masks obstruct the possibility of resistance to modernity's violence due to their function as "immunitary machines" that serve to reinforce one's own status, survival, and impunity. Echoing the biopolitical connotations of seventeenth-century doctors' beaked plague masks and rods, which conspicuously marked their monitory function and their distance from patients, preoccupation with technologies of individual self-protection contributes, in turn, to the fading out of *communitas*—to the diminishment of solidarity and the sacred, and of the possibility of meaningful copresence in space and time.<sup>20</sup>

But what if we think of masks in more immanent materialist terms? Masked faces in the time of COVID-19 may be uncanny, I want to suggest, but they are not disembodied, solipsistic, or dead. While art historian Hans Belting acknowledges the blurred boundaries between face and mask, his 2017 book, steeped in European references, reiterates the prime humanistic value of the real, "living face."<sup>21</sup> Attending to remediation, however, reveals masks' imbrication in and negotiation of life and livingness, and, contra Belting's anxiety about what he sees as portraiture's inevitable reifying effects, shows that masks and masked faces and figures can actually be the grounds for an emergence of novel, ethically illuminating iterations of humanness.<sup>22</sup> Poletti's and Rak's "automedial" is a vital conceptual framework here because it emphasizes ongoing "process" and invites consideration of how "particular media forms intersect with prevailing norms about what 'a life' is."<sup>23</sup> Grasped as automedial, masks cease to be generic for they also come into view as materials of "self-life-inscription."<sup>24</sup> My analysis of how mask repertoires are taken up in artists' materially various, digitally mediated projects takes further guidance from Poletti's emphasis on "how *zoë* [the physical life of the body], *bios* [life

story], and *auto* [self] are enmeshed with media in day-to-day life.”<sup>25</sup> Such a materialist and media-oriented approach reintroduces the possibilities not only of selfhood but of intersubjectivity and of the communal. In his engagement with the biopolitics of masks, Theophanidis’s description of face covering as a “*shared* immunity machine” thinks with and against biopolitical theory to reposition masking in the pandemic as, paradoxically, embedded in and speaking to “an ethic of togetherness,” though he cautions that masks may be too unstable and fraught to furnish “a new collective identity.”<sup>26</sup> In what follows, I build on the notion of a “shared immunity machine” and combine it with automedia to suggest that artists’ mediated self-portraiture practices reassociate masks with “life.”

I argue, moreover, that artists’ and activists’ projects mobilize the material and mediated “life” of masks toward a practice of responsibility that attends to our own and others’ vulnerabilities. In an April 2020 conversation with George Yancy, Judith Butler rearticulated her understanding of vulnerability in the time of COVID-19, emphasizing that it “is not just the condition of being potentially harmed by another. It names the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives.” Butler went on to stress the disparate effects of the pandemic for “vulnerable groups.”<sup>27</sup> The same month, disabled activist Alice Wong identified the eugenic underpinnings of the way vulnerability is invoked in the pandemic, the way in which a logic of attaching risk to groups too readily converts into policies that favor “protected classes” and rationalize regarding disabled people as “collateral damage.”<sup>28</sup> Wong foregrounded her ventilator, another kind of life-giving mask, as a key apparatus defining her “cyborg oracle” identity, and life itself as necessarily sustained by relations of interdependency. In the face of state and societal abandonment, disabled communities and social justice networks have continued to call attention to long COVID impacts, the risks of airborne transmission, and the ongoing protective value of masks. Building on Butler and Athena Athanasiou’s linking of vulnerability to dispossession,<sup>29</sup> Natalie Kouri-Towe observes that the pathways to solidarity in the time of COVID-19 are far from clear-cut. Because vulnerability is both “structural and psychic,” and because mutual aid projects are shaped by the neoliberal ideology they contest, solidarity projects will always be tense and contradictory.<sup>30</sup> “Attunement to vulnerability,” suggests Kouri-Towe, can aid in understanding how “our responses to the pandemic signal different collective attempts to recuperate from the loss of autonomy and containment that are undermined by viral contagion.”<sup>31</sup>

These multiple perspectives on vulnerability begin to clarify that masks do not exist simply as a tool for mitigating our own and others’ COVID risks, though they are also that. They simultaneously constitute an affective “scene” in Lauren Berlant’s sense of an other-than-narrative

“disturbance that can become an event” or a “clustering of situations.”<sup>32</sup> The shifting, contradictory associations and the intensity of public discourses and feelings that accumulate around this object—the ways in which masks function as a technology of racial othering, while simultaneously being claimed (and disparaged) for their protective role—have a shared root cause in the way that masks ambiguously materialize the surfaces and borders of bodies. Sara Ahmed’s discussion of “border objects” and “sticky signs” illuminates these dynamics. Ahmed, in her interpretation of Julia Kristeva’s foundational *Powers of Horror*, emphasizes that “The object that makes us ‘sick to the stomach’ is a substitute for the border itself, an act of substitution that protects the subject from all that is ‘not it.’ ... What makes ‘the not’ insecure is the possibility that what is ‘not not’ (what is ‘me’ or ‘us’) can slide into ‘the not,’ a slippage which would threaten the ontology of ‘being apart’ from others.”<sup>33</sup> The conceptual point I wish to emphasize is that masks repeatedly remind us that our bodies are not actually “apart” after all. Contiguous to mouth and nose, masks are metonyms not only for the coronavirus but for intercorporeality (our porosity and exposure to one another, in the invisible materiality of our shared exhalations and inhalations, for example)<sup>34</sup> and transcorporeality (our porosity and exposure to the world in its materiality).<sup>35</sup> If we want to advocate the situational ongoing and future use of masks as a tool, then navigating their “stickiness” (their accumulated associations, and the way they induce “stuck” responses of rejection, anxiety, blame, othering) is indispensable. As Kouri-Towe reflects, neoliberal ideology has constrained the social imagination to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in individualistic, market-oriented ways; however, “to survive the intensification of vulnerability induced by the pandemic, we need space to play with different ways for how to build solidarity effectively.”<sup>36</sup> In the hands of contemporary artists responding to the pandemic, masks, in all their fraughtness, emerge as a “space to play,” where through “non-linear and non-narrative media elements” it is possible to inquire into and generate “affective encounters” addressing the interplay of self-authorship, relation-making, affect, and responsibility in COVID times.<sup>37</sup>

### Mask Remediations in Artists’ Critical and Creative Projects

I began bookmarking examples of masked self-portraiture online early in the pandemic, in March 2020, through my own social media use. That same month, my mom sent me homemade cloth masks in the mail that I struggled to wear comfortably. I took selfies of these attempts, and later, more habituated to the practice of wearing them, I documented occasions like voting, visiting family outdoors, and my first two vaccine doses. I think and write from these personal and shared experiences, recognizing



that my vantage point is shaped by the privileges I have as a white, cis-gender scholar with employment security and (usually) able-bodiedness. On social media, during calls, and on walks, I listened to friends, colleagues, students, and family worry about non-clear masks as an access barrier for Deaf/deaf and hard-of-hearing people and about the unjust implications of mask mandates and travel bans on racialized communities. In 2021, my household, like many, swapped personalized, patterned, colorful, customized cloth masks for commercially tested materials as the hospital PPE crisis subsided, public health advice changed, and the highly transmissible Omicron variant surged.

Since I have been researching visual/digital self-portraiture and embodiment for over a decade, my social media feeds are primed to prioritize artists' projects that circulate in mainstream Western news and art journalism sources. Given the superabundance of pandemic mask-themed cultural production locally and globally, it is surely impossible to claim that my review (or anyone's review) of the field of cultural production is comprehensive. The period of image collection was April 2020 to March 2023, with the bulk of the examples originating in 2020, a year of sudden and sustained institutional closures, during which websites and social media came to be vital substitutes and supplements for gallery exhibition and all kinds of in-person interaction. I revisit social media and web archives from the first two years of the pandemic, sensitive to the contexts of their creation and circulation and the passing of time.<sup>38</sup> The mask projects referenced in this article are public-facing and remain accessible online at the time of writing. My discussion is alert to projects that resist the inequitable impacts of COVID-19 for marginalized groups, impacts that exacerbate and are exacerbated by systems of oppression including but not limited to racism, ableism, and ageism. Through this study and reflection on artworks of the recent past, I hope to foster a re-encountering of some of the objects, selves, and affects we have crafted, worn, performed, and circulated in the space-time of what Roy called the pandemic's "rupture" or "portal."

### *Sculpting the Masked Self: Encounters with Disgust and Discomfort*

*The Face Mask* is a self-portrait by UK-based sculptor Lindsey Mendick. Shared in an October 2020 Instagram post, it features a ceramic plant, plastic, and humanoid-inspired head supported by two garlic bulb feet (Figure 1). A blue surgical mask made of clay reveals a damp-looking impression of the artist's lips and nose, and is covered in thick and shiny glazing. The caption reads, "The face mask ... essential in the prevention of the spread of Covid 19 and handily shields you from your lovers [*sic*] pungent garlic breath."<sup>39</sup> Mendick's masked figure conjures abject smells,



**Figure 1.** Lindsay Mendick, *The Face Mask*, October 2020. Ceramic Sculpture. Photo Credit: Mark Blower. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

fluids, airborne droplets. The suggestion is that putatively sterile blue surgical masks take on “pungent” associations as they protect but also absorb us, and as we absorb them. We can connect Mendick’s artwork to Butler’s theorization of bodily vulnerability in COVID times: “impressionability and porosity define our embodied social lives. What another breathes out, I can breathe in, and something of my breath can find its way into yet another person. The human trace that someone leaves on an object may well be what I touch, pass along on another surface or absorb into my own body.”<sup>40</sup> Known for autobiographical installations with a “gothic sensibility,”<sup>41</sup> addressing domesticity, healthcare, and the volatility of the endocrinological body, Mendick, in this mask-themed work, interrupts any temptation toward an idealized view of intra- or intercorporeal homeostasis. *The Face Mask* powerfully registers the collapsing of borders, of coming up against our “impressionability and porosity,” provoking questions such as: Who is protecting whom from what? What’s becoming of our embodiments, in relation to others, as we shield ourselves and

breathe behind our masks? What does it mean to recoil from a person based on their masked or unmasked presentation? Is it grotesque or noble, or do we misperceive the latter as the former (and vice versa)? As Ahmed notes, disgust would distance the self from the object it perceives as a threatening, but paradoxically “contact or proximity” is required for this “pull[ing] away” to occur.<sup>42</sup> Mendick’s sculpture shows how, in becoming one with this uncanny, life-protecting material object/practice of masking, we ourselves become “border objects,” always admitting our own “prior contamination” and permeability.<sup>43</sup>

The automediality of *The Face Mask* makes it more than a rehearsal of (self)disgust: rather, Mendick’s self-inscription emphasizes the materiality of vulnerability and transformation and introduces a dynamic of ethical self-reflexivity. The metonymic force of masks makes them “sticky” objects and signs, and in their materiality and affectivity they simultaneously “contain” us while reminding of the ambiguity of our bodies’ boundaries. In Mendick’s piece, the wearer’s identity, as she beholds herself making an impression on the mask and taking on its form, is both recognizable and unrecognizable, human and more or other than human, plastic and organic. It is through automedial self-inscription (the facial imprint, the intimate address of the caption) that this 2020 sculpture draws out the humor, horror, and sadness of witnessing one’s own transformation not simply through but *into* the fabled medicinal, magical shield, be it garlic and/or mask. In its amplification of *zoë*—the biological life of the body—*The Face Mask* may invite us to linger over becoming abject, but it does not render this process of becoming masked in terms of retreating from responsibility. Instead, it portrays a self dwelling in stickiness.

Affectively charged pandemic selfhood is inscribed, too, in a radical mask performance *The Masque-Culotte* by Simone Forti that appeared online in April 2020 across Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook.<sup>44</sup> Forti is a senior Italian artist, based in LA, well known as a postmodern dancer, choreographer, and sculptor. The artwork consists of a word script for a participatory, everyday art project: instructions for how to make a face covering out of one’s own underwear. In a set of photos shared on Instagram, Forti enacts her script automedially by trying on and posing in her “masque-culotte” creations.<sup>45</sup> Grotesquerie is elicited by the artist’s playful cycloptic peering through the leg hole turned neck hole, an elaboration and archiving of the oscillating awkward, panicky, and stoical affects attendant on many of our first efforts at mask wearing and making. A visibly older white woman with long white hair performs herself as transforming into something more or other than human through her DIY efforts. As she poses, her body and face emerge as elastic, resilient, and resistant, much like the stretchy cloth materials she is trying to repurpose. Complicating early lockdown discourses that associated DIY

creativity with agency and hope,<sup>46</sup> Forti's image suggests that mask wearers and makers dwell in a space of vulnerability, uncertainty, and discomfort in which we may become, at least at some moments, unrecognizable, or potentially repulsive, to ourselves and one another. A provisional solidarity emerges, however, in the humor. To my consternation, which I'm sure was visible in my panicked attempts to restore them, cloth masks used to slip off my nose while I was doing my essential errands, until I had adequate practice wearing them: Forti's self-distortion felt so familiar. When I reposted *The Masque-Culotte* on my own social media accounts, some of my friends found it funny and relatable, as I did, but some sharply recoiled. Forti's improvisational masked-self-image suggests that disgust, discomfort, and ambivalence may be inextricable from becoming pandemic selves and from our DIY innovations.

### ***Everyday Masks: Navigating Distance and Proximity in Online Visual Diaries***

The tensions between feared and desired proximity and mandated distancing emerged as a prominent motif as well in online visual diary projects that took up mask aesthetics during 2020, where the mask becomes an index of the coronavirus's looming closeness and the loss of connection with increasingly distant others. There was a logic of catachresis at work as masks adhered to and became prominent within online autobiographical projects devised to document everyday life over time; in these diaries, face coverings visually represent the virus's intrusion into our lives, subjectivities, and relationships. Here, too, however, the materiality and semiotics of masks are not simply disgusting or negating of individual will but repurposed to sustain complex affects, automedial self-inscriptions, and political critiques within the pandemic's disorientation and upheaval. Two artists' visual diary projects will serve to illustrate.

Japanese artist Tatsuya Tanaka is the creator of the *Miniature Calendar* series of daily online installations, in which he has, since 2011, photographed and shared his reconfigurations of everyday objects in small-scale scenes that reimagine domestic life in the context of social, technological, and ecological change.<sup>47</sup> In 2020, Tanaka's dioramas evolved to prominently incorporate several pandemic objects associated with scarcity, desire, and ambivalence—including rapid tests, bread, and toilet paper as well as masks—using them not to escape to explore the fluctuating dynamics and textures of everyday life under public health orders.<sup>48</sup> In an installment called "Invisible Voyage," Tanaka repurposes three blue masks as water, a white (or reversed) one as a sail, accompanied by tiny plastic yellow raincoat-clad human figures in a little boat.<sup>49</sup> Masks are here

revealed as malleable, something we can perhaps play with, but the micro-diorama simultaneously channels the intensities of becoming adrift, unmoored, isolated. I connect this feeling of dispersion with what Chan names as the “distal” aspect of “pandemic temporalities”: the painful social gaps and inequalities created by distancing that are not closed but exacerbated by the dividing force of digital technologies, which propel us into sharply separated “lifeworlds” of protected remote workers and frontline essential labor.<sup>50</sup> As the mask floating on the water suggests, “Invisible Voyage” meditates, too, on the discarded cloth and plastic masks that litter our homes, streets, and waterways, an environmental problem that hovers on the edges of individual and public awareness. The theme of invisible flows and the “distal” force of the ocean voyage imagery make for a poignant contrast with Tanaka’s articulation of ecological and pandemic responsibility in the up-close, intimate caption, “After the shoot, I personally wear the mask.”<sup>51</sup> In these ways, “Invisible Voyage” (like Tanaka’s *Miniature Calendar* project more generally) suggests that it is possible to align the everyday practice of masking with aesthetic work and self-documentation, and perhaps even in the process become “contemporaneous together.”<sup>52</sup>

Another longstanding (2010–present) born-digital diary project, Connie Sun’s *Cartoon Connie Comics Blog*, incorporated masks in its autobiographical documentation of the artist’s everyday life in New York City, not only making them integral to her depiction of quarantine life but also to her dialogue with herself and her readers about (her own and our) mental health. As in Tanaka’s project, masks peppered Sun’s blog and Instagram page during 2020 to 2022. Sun’s project holds space for seemingly contradictory views and affective states. In the serial, iterative space of her blog, she avows the scientifically proven efficacy of masks to prevent airborne transmission, as depicted, for instance, in the advice-oriented two-part panel “Upside Down Face Masks.”<sup>53</sup> But she also links the experience of public masking in the city to her justifiable fear of being targeted by the sharp xenophobia- and conspiracy-fueled rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans during the pandemic. In an entry titled “Subway Sanity,” Sun depicts herself traveling masked on the subway to see friends across town, affirming mask efficacy in the same moment as she contemplates the risk of being subjected to hate and violence: “I’ve been scared to take the subway lately, as an Asian woman in New York City ... but I also haven’t seen friends in way too long, so I made myself.”<sup>54</sup> Masks are, in this perspective, a tool, but far from a neutral one. Sun’s self-conscious willingness to take this risk is narrated in the context of the pandemic’s mental health toll. Over the two years prior to this post, Sun plumbed feelings of loss and exhaustion that accompanied public health restrictions for her as a single person and an Asian woman in the city. As another

prevaccination wave of infections loomed, Sun pictured herself walking alone in a park space otherwise populated by couples and small groups.<sup>55</sup> Here, she draws herself as masked and as fully enclosed in bouncing bubbles labeled and numbered “(1) pandemic fatigue,” “(2) pandemic lonely,” and “(3) pandemic must-stay-strong,” her posture marking the inverse of progress toward the final optimistic injunction as she moves from purposefully striding along, to standing still with her face and hands pressed against the transparent walls of her outdoor bubble, to lying down curled up on the ground. Surreal only in part, the visual metaphor literalizing a masked/bubbled entirely solitary existence implies the questions: How long can mental health and motivation be sustained, and what is *communitas* now?

Well over a year into the pandemic, Sun went on to picture herself holding a mask while experimenting with facial expressions.<sup>56</sup> The attempt to shift from a neutral attitude to a smile results in Sun adopting a forced full-teeth grimace, a crystallization of awkwardness and self-alienation that chimes with Forti’s expressive self-performance analyzed above; Sun’s title reads, gently but ruefully, “Forgot How My Face Works.” Confounding Orientalist stereotypes (intensified during the pandemic) that, as Vivian Huang reminds us, continue to construct Asian faces as “inscrutable,” denying both interiority and expression,<sup>57</sup> Sun’s drawing of her face mobilizes the plasticity of graphic self-representation. Her close-up, hand-drawn exploration plumbs shifting feelings about masking including existential questions of self-recognition and the capacity for interpersonal connection, while sustaining her personal ethical, citizenly commitment to masking in New York City’s public spaces. As Sun’s and Tanaka’s respective comic and diorama show, online diaries during COVID-19 combined documentation of the quotidian, traces of the human creative hand, intimate address to the reader, and digital circulation not only to provisionally bridge the alienation of social distancing, but also to meditate on masking as an affective scene, to use Berlant’s term, with complex layers of implication for identity, relationality, and solidarity.<sup>58</sup>

### **Mask Solidarities: Mutual Aid Projects**

As I have been arguing, artists’ projects engage the materiality and uncanniness of masks to grapple with pandemic transformations—affective uncertainty and disgust, distance, and proximity—in ways that are deeply relational. Artistic work has also taken up masks in projects characterized by more overt, more collectively oriented enactments of activism and social critique grounded in mutual aid networks. As Kouri-Towe puts it, the political and ethical problem before us is that, “despite the uneven distribution of vulnerability, times of crisis render urgently the need for

solidarity across differences.”<sup>59</sup> Bringing elements of *auto* and *bios* into play along with affectivity complexity and political commitment, mutual aid mask making projects have insisted on the value of lives in the face of systemic discrimination and marginalization.

“Masks for Crips,” an initiative of the Crip and Ally Care Exchange, is documented by project leads Alison Kopit and Chun-shan (Sandie) Yi.<sup>60</sup> Still visible as an installation on Instagram at the time of writing,<sup>61</sup> “Masks for Crips” was a time-limited, small-scale project that made and distributed approximately three hundred masks within the organizers’ local Chicago-area network from March to July 2020; this endeavor exemplifies the phenomenon of “ad hoc ‘crip mask brigades’” that Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha has documented as a crucial aspect of the disability justice care webs that have provided “lifesaving mutual-aid survival” during the pandemic.<sup>62</sup> Knowing that the requirements of disabled people living in community were not being considered or met as attention was directed to urgent needs in hospital and long-term care settings, Kopit and Yi and their collaborators sought not only to equip disabled kin in their network with potentially life-saving apparatuses but to simultaneously offer another lifeline: an active thread of caring communication, a way of “letting [disabled people in Chicago] know they were not forgotten.”<sup>63</sup> As Kopit and Yi recount, the project deliberately mobilized core tenets of disability justice in a praxis that prioritized disabled leadership, “collective access,” and sustainability; its time-limited nature and regional scope reflect the anticapitalist, access-oriented principles embedded in the project.

Especially salient for this paper’s discussion of masks as automedia is visual artist Yi’s emphasis on “crip signature,”<sup>64</sup> a concept from Yi’s pre-pandemic artistic practice, in which she conceived and designed from the ground up wearable, one-of-a-kind pieces of art to meet a unique wearer’s access needs. In the COVID emergency, however, Yi and her collaborators opted to use a set of sewing patterns. Yet the sense of a “crip signature” remained intangibly “embedded” through the relational and intentional qualities of “Masks for Crips,” as the makers selected a pattern and traced, cut, sewed, and decorated masks for individuals they knew. As Yi reflects, “it’s about knowing that as I create this piece, I have a specific person in mind ... I think about their place in the world at this very moment of time during the pandemic ... It wasn’t done arbitrarily—we knew many of these people, so in a way it was like the care we put into the project was in the handmade process. ‘I wish you to be protected. I wish you to receive this care and protection’ was a message embedded in the project and in each mask.”<sup>65</sup> “Masks for Crips” enacted a relational ethics of care, bringing vulnerable selves together across distance, creating and



sustaining bonds of interdependence and mutual aid among disabled households, and embracing the creative, playful possibilities of disabled design and organizational work. Kopit, who played a primarily administrative role, highlights the labor of adapting all the processes to facilitate meeting diverse access needs, not only adapting masks to the intended wearer's requirements but also building access into the project's approach to communication technologies and transportation.<sup>66</sup> Such broad and encompassing attention to access made the mutual aid effort a total work of accessible, community-engaged art. As Piepzna-Samarasinha observes, through disability justice practices of community care, disabled people "taught the world how to mask, wash your hands, boost your immune system with herbs in the kitchen rack, organize for vax equity and against care rationing," and thereby showed that "[w]e are the ones who know, more than anyone, the technology of how to actually care."<sup>67</sup>

NDN X AZN, "a solidarity art project between Indigenous and Asian creatives to explore how pandemics have impacted our communities, then and now," is another small-scale project with a public-facing presence. Commencing in December 2020, NDN x AZN took an intimate and transnational stand against necropolitics, including the disproportionate distribution of the COVID-19 death toll and the marking of marginalized communities, especially Asian and Asian diasporic ones, as scapegoats in public discourse. The project had its genesis in the response of founder Tania Larsson, Denendeh (Northwest Territories)-based Gwich'in artist/jeweler, to a friend facing anti-Asian hate as racist and xenophobic attacks escalated in 2020. Drawing on her own networks, Larsson invited artists to model their own mask designs, and to write artist's statements about their projects, for circulation on a website and Instagram.<sup>68</sup> Echoing comic diarist Connie Sun's use of hashtags, on Instagram the project is accompanied by links to political and community care actions in support of Asian American elders and to stop anti-AAPI (Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander) hate. Collectively the masks gathered here honor friendship, land, and ancestral ways, emphasizing mask making and wearing as skilled, deliberate practices and incorporating community-specific and often land-based materials and knowledges. These multiple dimensions are visible and tangible in the two-panel fabric mask made and worn by artist and health care worker Karma Henry (Paiute, Italian, Portuguese) for NDN X AZN. Bringing together lived knowledge of Indigenous traditions, the perspective of a medical professional, and deep friendship with a coworker, Henry's contribution honors the practical and symbolic role of masking as protection, drawing on the living traditions and activating the lived possibility of actively shielding one another from the virus and from discrimination, hate, and violence. In her artist's

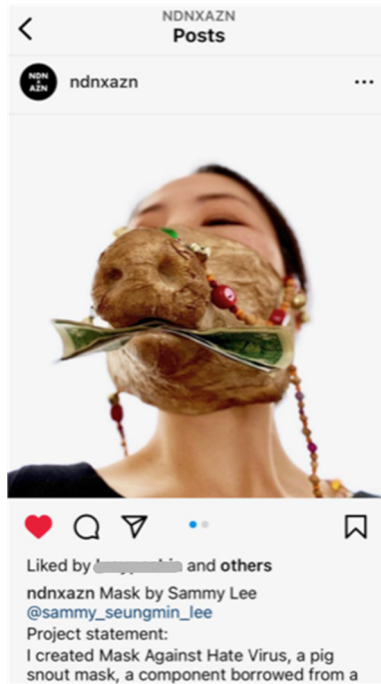


statement on the project website, she understands masks as “a sign of healing, requirement, protection, dissent, practicality” and emphasizes intercorporeality and intersubjectivity as integral to them: “This mask represents us, a Japanese/Mexican woman and a Paiute/Italian/Portuguese woman. Our two halves coming together to offer protection and solidarity. I beaded the felt with a conscious heart and sewed each piece with memories of what has been and hopes for what will be. This mask became my medicine.”<sup>69</sup> Called *Hachiya*, referencing the persimmon fruit (a symbol of toxicity transformed), the mask seeks to both shield and pay tribute to her friend Christy Hachiya.

Recalling Connie Sun’s body of work, Sammy Lee’s contribution to NDN X AZN called *Mask Against Hate Virus* constitutes a complex creative response to the sharp xenophobia- and conspiracy-fueled rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans in 2020 and a riposte to harmful stereotypes of inscrutability. In adopting a fabricated (paper and acrylic) version of a pig’s snout, a ritual object associated with “health and success” in Korean culture, Lee publicly claims an identification with her Korean ancestry/culture/community, repossessing as “auspicious” an animal image that is paradigmatically coded as disgusting in monotheistic/Abrahamic cultures. Lee’s caption autobiographically reflects, “I imagined wearing the pig snout mask and hearing the community’s wishes for health, safety, and solidarity” (Figure 2).<sup>70</sup> I read *Mask Against Hate Virus* and *Hachiya* as mnemonic devices with healing/medicinal properties, but also as instances of “crip signature” in Sandie Yi’s sense, because, as Lee takes care to highlight, hate crimes cause psychological injury, and the artists’ projects are specifically motivated by the exigency of seeking body-mind healing and protection. Masks are neither utilitarian nor abstract for the contributors to NDN X AZN. We can say, rather, guided by Huang’s discussion of the power of “queer racial forms and affects” to generate “relational, contingent world-making,” that their aesthetic is focused on supporting “minoritarian life and creativity.”<sup>71</sup> In their acts of crafting, wearing, and telling the stories of their masks, Henry and Lee (like their fellow contributors to the project) meditate on the everyday and extraordinary objects and ideas that sustain them as individuals in relation to others within and across inherited Asian and Indigenous identities and ancestral communities.

### ***Mask Mnemonics: Post-Pandemic Relations and Collective Mourning***

In *Illness as Many Narratives*, Stella Bolaki warns that the critical-political force of “emergent narratives” risks being blunted as they circulate *via* the neoliberal internet with its systemic tendency toward “decontextualization.”<sup>72</sup> In line with Bolaki’s argument, the solidarity projects discussed in



**Figure 2.** Sammy Lee, *Mask Against Hate Virus*, August 2020. Paper, acrylic varnish, money, beads, thread. Screen capture of public Instagram post on NDNxAZN @ndnxazn, December 14, 2020. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

the previous section develop various aesthetic strategies for “re-infusing images with political content.”<sup>73</sup> Masks for Crips and NDN X AZN insistently resituate masks in ways that confront and mitigate the trivialization of lives, losses, and vulnerabilities amid the pandemic and insist on relation-making/claiming. Yet recontextualization is no easy feat, and the relationship between mask imagery and pandemic subjectivities remains unstable and postpandemic futures uncertain. In this context, artists’ projects that thematize the im/possibility of collective mourning through mask making and wearing can help us think and feel through the shifting affects and remember the pandemic in a way that includes difficult knowledge, the nearly unbearable memory of mass death.

The University of Denver in-person show *MASK*, in which Sammy Lee’s “Mask Against Hate Virus” was exhibited, featured many moving and resourceful contributions associating masks with transformation into manifold life forms and ways of living, morphing humans into porcupines, or covering faces with repurposed materials (felt, condoms, plastic bottles), or fashioning supplementary breathing apparatuses.<sup>74</sup> Among these, my attention was caught by Trey Duvall’s *Incalculable Loss*, which offers a piercing reflection on lost lives (Figure 3). Forming a bust out of

black and white printed hospital wristbands, it references the data on COVID-related deaths in the US, and echoes the stark text-only *New York Times* front cover featuring the names of the dead on May 23, 2020, when confirmed fatalities reached 100,000.<sup>75</sup> Denver-based artist Duvall's simultaneously voluminous and hollow sculpture makes tangible the lives lost to COVID-19 in the first wave of the pandemic, figuratively suggesting that they surround and even ambiguously bandage the body politic that lives on; indeed, our breath circulates around and through the gaps in the structure. When "Incalculable Loss" was exhibited in 2020, wristbands spilled off the pedestal into the exhibition space, "away from the location of any functioning mask."<sup>76</sup> Through its eerie and confrontational play with representational scale and form—individual lives reduced to death statistics in the public sphere—*Incalculable Loss* marks the failures of governmental response and pandemic preparedness and the limitations of individual responses to enact the forms of collective care and justice required. It creates a "sensuous proximity" with untimely, preventable deaths, a nearness that we cannot escape no matter how much we might want to push it away.<sup>77</sup> In Duvall's hands, the mask form becomes a vehicle for an uncomfortable but necessary responsibility that Butler underscores: the "public mourning of mass death" in the pandemic. As Butler suggests, "One does not have to know the person lost to affirm that this



**Figure 3.** Trey Duvall, Installation view of *Incalculable Loss*, 2020. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

was a life. What one grieves is the life cut short, the life that should have had a chance to live more, the value that person has carried now in the lives of others, the wound that permanently transforms those who live on.”<sup>78</sup> Contemplating Duvall’s artwork, the proceeds of which the artist has donated to COVID recovery projects,<sup>79</sup> reminds us that the significance of masks is both individual and collective, expressive, and ethico-political. They can, in this kind of iteration that grapples with public health data’s disembodiment at scale, make lives and deaths present and tangible, collectively, in a way that might invite and potentially renew *communitas*.

An even more extensive autobiographical ceramic installation by Montreal-based artist Karine Giboulo called *Housewarming* reconfigures masks from a perspective shaped by chronic illness, aging, and planetary and environmental consciousness, inscribing manifold vulnerable bodies that linger to haunt the ascendent story that is being told about “collective” postpandemic recovery. Created during periods of quarantine in 2020–21 and shared episodically on Instagram prior to an on-site exhibition at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto in 2022–23, Giboulo’s work is populated by miniature polymer clay figures, and sets avatars of the artist alongside imaginative remediations of a variety of public scenes, bringing the world in pandemic crisis into the interior space of the artist’s home and figuratively inside her body–mind. Viewers simultaneously encounter an auto/biographical narrative of Giboulo’s diagnosis and treatment for autoimmune illness (ankylosing spondylitis) and her quotidian practices of pain management, household labor, and creative activity. This knowledge of the difficulties of Giboulo’s embodied life manifests alongside intricate dioramas of masked figures performing agricultural and warehouse work: those differently and unequally risk-bearing vulnerable selves in whose lives her “safe” work-from-home existence is profoundly implicated. But the dependency of the artist’s chronically ill body on the sustaining essential labor of distant others is far from the only point of connection. In *Housewarming*, the value and visibility of lives extends beyond the realm of economic productivity and indebtedness. Outside the walls of the house, asylum seekers sleep in a tent, and on the kitchen counter, masked people queue for food bank parcels. Everywhere there is evidence of the environmental impact of industrial agriculture, mass tourism, and digital technology’s ambiguous connecting/dividing effects, as in a scenario where Giboulo figures herself falling headfirst into the void of her computer screen.

In a quietly confrontational gesture (a deliberate paradox) within *Housewarming*, Giboulo’s *Jars* places figures of long-term care residents in dozens of transparent glass containers, most of them alone but a few

accompanied inside their rooms by masked and gowned staff performing personal care duties (Figure 4). It is a multiracial group, but more of the attendants are Black or brown than the elders they care for, and, in some of the lidded mason jars, staff hold and comfort one another. Felt and embodied testimony to long-term-care residents' and workers' lived experiences and the disavowed realities of interdependency and of the racialization and gendering of care work press up against the glass walls of isolation and media spectacle, in a display that memorializes the “horror show” of high COVID-19 death rates and the suffering in mismanaged Canadian (Québec and Ontario) long-term care homes.<sup>80</sup> Looking at Giboulo's encased scenes of isolation and care, my breath catches. Our loved ones are here, were there. Visually prominent in Giboulo's Instagram feed,<sup>81</sup> when viewed in person, the clear, hard containers, and the small figures they hold, are even more arresting as they are placed in a pantry room adjacent to the kitchen, a physical sequestration, the knowledge of their suffering sidelined, not erased but turned Gothic, a “disgusting” but also uncannily domesticized representation of public unease and denial. Giboulo's use of miniaturized masked clay figures, mason jars, and the replica of her home repositions face covering as a material practice: masks function here as both bodily shield and memory aid, and have the capacity to carry multiple affects and sensory knowledge. By building this series of nested containers of contrasting degrees of porosity and



**Figure 4.** Karine Giboulo, Installation view of *Jars* from the exhibition *Housewarming*, Gardiner Museum, Toronto, October 2022–May 2023. Polymer clay, mason jars, and shelves. Photo credit: Toni Hafkenscheid. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

transparency, Giboulo returns to us a knowledge of the “other within” the stories now being told about the pandemic’s “end,” suggesting that the subjectivities of those who live on—her own, mine, ours—are haunted houses. Like *Incalculable Loss*, *Housewarming* deploys materiality, spatiality, and scale to underscore the failure of public policy and the need for collective action to prevent foreseeable deaths and redress ageist, ableist, and racist patterns of state abandonment. Both projects foreground the creative and political possibilities of the ambivalence and discomfort attendant on teaching ourselves how to enact protection and to understand the relations of differently vulnerable bodies and lives in the pandemic as it continues, and as the echoes of loss continue to reverberate. Giboulo’s bittersweet title *Housewarming* asks us to meditate on this discomfiting knowledge of relation—of the fact that in an ethical and a planetary frame of reference our bodies, though differently vulnerable, are not “apart” from one another—and to allow our subjectivities, memories, and politics to be transformed by it.

## Conclusion: Reimagining Vulnerable Selves

I began tracking the phenomenon of artists’ mask projects during the spring of 2020 in the lead-up to the WHO’s June 5, 2020, global advisory promoting the use of fabric masks by members of the public in gathering spaces where physical distance could not be maintained.<sup>82</sup> On December 1, 2020, the WHO reissued its advice, underscoring the importance of high-quality, standardized masks for people over the age of 60 or with preexisting health conditions.<sup>83</sup> Since then, and following the rise of Omicron, an increasing emphasis on masks as protecting the wearer, combined with reactionary spectacles rejecting public health orders and the relinquishing of mask mandates (even in clinical settings), we have been witnessing a departure from the association of masks with “social solidarity and altruism”<sup>84</sup> as crystallized in the watchword “My mask protects you. Your mask protects me.” The dominant recoding of mask wearing as individualized act of *immunitas* makes it hard not to despair, for it disavows our intercorporeality, abandons the vulnerable, and stigmatizes the practical, situational use of a tool that can offer crucial protection.<sup>85</sup>

In this context, revisiting the pandemic’s “mask aesthetics” can remind us of a more communal, optimistic, and experimental moment in time, through which we might seek not only to measure dashed hopes for acting in common but also to reflect on pandemic selves and socialities, both the ones we inhabit now, in 2024, and the more communal ones we might yet become. In May 2020, Mirzoeff elaborated on Roy’s dictum “the pandemic is a portal” by noting that the portal is an event defined by creative and political action: “It will be both digital and material. A portal

is not quite a frame. It may have edges but not borders. It creates a sense of relation not of exclusion. The intensity of white reaction responds to their sense that that gateway is, paradoxically, now more visible than it has been for some time. How this plays out depends on how the several waves of COVID-19 infection are imagined and configured. I really don't know what will happen."<sup>86</sup> In response to Mirzoeff's implied relay, I suggest that returning to digital mask archives can help us retroactively learn from artistic and activist efforts to "imagine and configure" masks in ways that emphasize "relation not exclusion" and point to the possibility of a socially just rather than a reactionary (racist, xenophobic, ableist, and ageist) future.

Masks are not only "border objects" but "portal objects." And, as my essay has endeavored to show, the range of forms taken up in artists' COVID-19 mask projects is vast, encompassing hand-drawing, screen printing, digital photography, graphic design, and sculptural portraits and dioramas. They hinge on self-inscription, everydayness, and life thinking, and are motivated by an urgent requirement to testify to the conditions structuring their own and others' lived experiences of vulnerability and risk during the pandemic. Their "mediated materialities" do the opposite of disembodiment and evacuating the world of past and future tenses, as some cultural critics worry will result from the overwhelming of mediation of faces in the postdigital era.<sup>87</sup> Grappling with the polysemy, affectivity, and ambivalence of masks, these projects emphasize the work of living and caring in the pandemic, and support an understanding of masks as "shared immunity machines" that open onto the possibilities for enacting relationality, protection, solidarity, and mourning.<sup>88</sup> This is the case despite the desire to push them away in disgust, as a matter of imposition or a relic of the past. At times, artists' mask projects have incorporated public health pedagogy in the more didactic sense of advising and insisting on the value of mask protocols, but a deeper, enduring significance for solidarity politics is their critical engagement with and archiving of the new iteration of the "living face"<sup>89</sup> that I argue we have become through our pandemic masking practices: vulnerable, uncertain, vexed, but at the same time capable of protecting ourselves and others, initiating lifelines, and navigating these difficult times. Inasmuch as "the virus is a relation," as Alexis Shotwell has written, masks are a matter of you, me, and us.<sup>90</sup> As icons and material objects, they shuttle between the singular and the plural, the self and others. Incorporated into the materiality, everydayness, and creativity of COVID times, masks are integral to the life of the body, the upheaval of our lives, the losses we are mourning, the overlapping injustices we must fight, and the stories we tell about what it was and is like to be



in our situations and to be connected to one another during the pandemic.

## Notes

1. Tufekci, "Why the Science Is Clear."
2. MASK exhibition website statement, quoted in Nelson, "Creative Face Masks"; Theophanidis, "*Sua Cuique Persona*," 39.
3. Cheng et al., "Wearing Face Masks in the Community."
4. Theophanidis, "*Sua Cuique Persona*," 34, 37, 39.
5. Roy, "The Pandemic Is a Portal."
6. Lewis, "Where Are the Photos?"
7. Jurgenson quoted in Dafoe, "How This Moment."
8. Mirzoeff, "Whiteness."
9. Zine, "Pandemic Imaginaries," 23.
10. Ibid., 25; see also Huang, *Surface Relations*, 7.
11. See Redmond, "Pandemic of Creative Loneliness"; Goodwin and Brophy, "Asynchronous Encounters."
12. Shotwell, "Virus."
13. Poletti, *Stories of the Self*, 14–15; Rak, "Life Writing versus Automedia," 156.
14. Poletti and Rak, "Introduction: Digital Dialogues," 1–2. There is also important precedent for seeing masks as vehicles of identity transformation and healing in the anthropological, health humanities, and drama therapy literatures (see Pollock, "Masks and the Semiotics of Identity," and Meineck, "Masks").
15. Jurgenson quoted in Dafoe, "How This Moment."
16. Chan, "Pandemic Temporalities," 13.2.
17. De Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," 921–923.
18. On the ethical limitations of approaching autobiography as a play of tropes and on alternative feminist models, see Gilmore, *Autobiographics*; Kadar, "Coming to Terms"; Rak, "Marlene Kadar's Life Writing"; Warley, "Mar and Me."
19. Esposito, *Third Person*, 18.
20. Ibid., 16; see also Claire Fontaine, "Letters against Separation."
21. Belting, *Face and Mask*, 6.
22. Ibid., 20.
23. Rak, "Life Writing versus Automedia," 156; Poletti, *Stories of the Self*, 14–15.
24. Poletti, *Stories of the Self*, 14.
25. Ibid., 14.
26. Theophanidis, "*Sua Cuique Persona*," 40, 38; emphasis added.
27. Butler and Yancy, "Interview."
28. Wong, "I'm Disabled."
29. Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*.
30. Kouri-Towe, "Solidarity," 194–195.
31. Ibid., 193.
32. Berlant in Poletti and Rak, "Blog as Experimental Setting," 270, 267.
33. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 86–87.
34. Butler and Yancy, "Interview."



35. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 28.
36. Kouri-Towe, "Solidarity," 195–196.
37. Zarzycka and Olivieri, "Affective Encounters," 529.
38. McNeill and Zuern, "Reading Digital Lives Generously," 136–138.
39. Lindsey Mendink (@lindseymendick), "The Face Mask," Instagram post (public), October 8, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGFHB9iFMjY/>
40. Butler and Yancy, "Interview."
41. Talk Art, "Lindsey Mendick"; see also Judah, "Hormones and Hairy Claws."
42. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 85, 87.
43. Ibid., 96.
44. Simone Forti, *The Masque-Culotte*, ICI (Independent Curators International), #DoItHome project, Google Arts and Culture/Serpentine Galleries, April 4, 2020, <https://g.co/arts/SrGqBuTahyTRaQn39>.
45. Hans Ulrich Obrist (@hansulrichobrist), "Simone Forti—Do It Number 22," Instagram post (public), April 4, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-j4a3Xg7-N/>.
46. Redmond, "Pandemic of Creative Loneliness," 186, 195.
47. Tatsuya Tanaka. *Miniature Calendar* (website). Accessed May 30, 2023. <https://miniature-calendar.com/>.
48. designboom, "Tatsuya Tanaka Creates."
49. Tatsuya Tanaka, "Invisible Voyage," September 1, 2020, *Miniature Calendar*, <https://miniature-calendar.com/200901>.
50. Chan, "Pandemic Temporalities," 13.2.
51. Tanaka, "Invisible Voyage."
52. Chan, "Pandemic Temporalities," 13.6.
53. Connie Sun, "Pandemic Diary: Upside Down Face Masks," May 20, 2020, <https://www.conniewonnie.com/2020/05/pandemic-diary-upside-down-face-masks.html>.
54. Sun, "Subway Sanity (Plus Crayon Cat)," February 23, 2022, <https://www.conniewonnie.com/2022/02/subway-sanity-plus-crayon-cat.html>.
55. Sun, "Illustration: Pandemic Fatigue," October 21, 2020, <https://www.conniewonnie.com/search?q=pandemic+fatigue>.
56. Sun, "Forgot How My Face Works," August 19, 2021, <https://www.conniewonnie.com/2021/08/forgot-how-my-face-works.html>.
57. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 7.
58. Berlant in Poletti and Rak, "Blog as Experimental Setting," 268–69.
59. Kouri-Towe, "Solidarity," 194.
60. Kopit and Yi, "Dialogue."
61. Crip & Ally Care Exchange, @disabilityculture\_cace. Accessed June 22, 2023. [https://www.instagram.com/disabilityculture\\_cace/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/disabilityculture_cace/?hl=en).
62. Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future Is Disabled*, 55.
63. Kopit and Yi, "Dialogue."
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled*, 36–37.
68. While the website is no longer active, NDN X AZN (@ndnxazn) is a public account that remains accessible on Instagram at the time of writing. There is also ample coverage in online national news sources; see, e.g. Zingel, "Mask Project Centres."

69. NDN X AZN (@ndnxazn), "Mask by @karmasbrain," Instagram post (public), March 10, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMPTKCVICcM/?hl=en>.
70. NDN X AZN (@ndnxazn), "Mask by Sammy Lee @sammy\_seungmin\_lee," Instagram post (public), December 14, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ClyqxDI1N16/?hl=en>.
71. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 4–5.
72. Bolaki, *Illness as Many Narratives*, 214.
73. Ibid., 214–215.
74. Detailed reviews of the Denver show are available, for example, in Jobson, "Artists Explore Self-Expression" and Nelson, "Creative Face Masks."
75. Grippe, "Project behind a Front Page."
76. Duvall, Personal Correspondence.
77. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 85.
78. Butler and Yancy, "Interview."
79. Duvall, Personal Correspondence.
80. Bowdish, "Ageism and the Pandemic."
81. Karine Gibouleau, @karinegiboulo, Instagram page. Accessed June 22, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/karinegiboulo/?hl=en>.
82. Kelland, "Wear Masks in Public"; WHO, "Advice on the Use of Masks."
83. WHO, "Mask Use."
84. Cheng et al., "Wearing Face Masks in the Community."
85. For critical reflections on abandonment and hopelessness in Omicron's wake, see Kopit and Yi, "Dialogue" and Picard, "Now Is Not the Time."
86. Mirzoeff, "Whiteness."
87. Poletti, *Stories of the Self*, 6; Belting, *Face and Mask*, 240–241.
88. Theophanidis, "*Sua Cuique Persona*," 40.
89. Belting, *Face and Mask*, 6, 20.
90. Shotwell, "Virus."

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