

TIBOR DE NAGY

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Deep Looking: Joy Episalla Interviewed by Ksenia M. Soboleva

Photographic work that slows down time.

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Spaces Between: Siobhan Liddell Interviewed by Ksenia M. Soboleva



Detail of Joy Episalla, *foldtogram (35' 2.5" x 44, August, iteration 6)*, 2018–22, silver gelatin object, dimensions variable. Photo by Alan Wiener. Courtesy of the artist.

Moving between photography and sculpture, Joy Episalla's work traces the touches we leave behind on the fabrics of everyday life. A seasoned AIDS activist and member of the queer art collective fierce pussy, which advocated for lesbian visibility during the AIDS crisis and continues to explore timely issues around queerness today, Episalla has maintained a dedicated studio practice alongside their collective work. I had the pleasure of being in conversation with the artist on the occasion of their [first exhibition](#) with Tibor de Nagy gallery where they

are exhibiting a series of foldtograms. A signature medium within Episalla's multifaceted practice, foldtograms are photographic prints produced from the darkroom process of camera-less photography. In the interview below, we talk about these and a new video work.

—Ksenia M. Soboleva

Ksenia M. SobolevaYour exhibition at Tibor de Nagy is poetically titled *crack fold burn bright*. How did you arrive at those four words?

Joy EpisallaThe title came from thinking about the things that I do to make the foldtograms. I was thinking about process and the breaking of the rules of darkroom protocol. The words *crack fold burn bright* seemed almost like an incantation.

KMSYour work is often described as existing in a realm between photography and sculpture, which the foldtograms are representative of. What can these two media—photography and sculpture—offer together that they cannot on their own? Or, phrased differently: What is gained when photography enters a sculptural realm? Is there more potential for shapeshifting and transformation?

JEWhen you think about it, a photograph is a sculpture. It's material. There is the paper and the emulsion, which may or may not have an image embedded in it. It is an object in and of itself. And I'm pushing that envelope further by the actions I perform on it. I want the so-called photograph to live in three-dimensional space. In my earlier work I was capturing some sort of recognizable image in the photograph and installing it in a context to make it more three-dimensional. For example, the pillow pieces were face-mounted to thick plexiglass and sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. The foldtograms are a further extension of this; instead of having to mount something, or print something, or hang it on a wall, I've done away with all of that. And I have moved away from representation. My engagement with process produces what you see on the surface of the silver

gelatin paper. The foldtograms are silver gelatin objects. They may be rippled, cracked, or bent; and they are malleable and can fold and change shape depending on the site or situation.



Joy Episalla, *foldtogram (brnt 1, August 2018)*, 2018, gelatin silver object, 24 × 20 inches. Photo by Carrie Yamaoka. Courtesy of the artist.

KMSIn much of your previous work, you have explored domestic objects and environments. Pillows, curtains, and blankets have all made appearances—fabrics that soak up our lived experiences. I think of your practice as visualizing the traces we leave on surfaces, both physical and emotional. Where did this interest originate?

JEIt came from a number of directions. One was the AIDS crisis and losing a lot of people. It made me look at what was left behind and the residue, what is left on everyday objects, and the fact that those objects were imbued with traces of histories. I was also trying to make visible the passage of time by focusing on the residue. And make visible, in a sense, what had been rendered invisible, perhaps suppressed or forgotten. The things that are left behind interest me because they

contain traces of our lived experiences. As they are reconfigured from one site to the next, the foldtograms end up bearing the traces of their previous iterations. They contain their histories and pull their histories forward into the future.

We often refer to paper as having a memory because paper is delicate. It's fragile; it can be dinged or damaged very easily; it can be bent or folded. In the foldtograms, I'm using these scars as damage that activates. It is the damage that creates the silver gelatin object. We also talk about a photograph as a memory. In the foldtograms, memory is embedded in their making; they are made under particular conditions, at a particular moment on a particular day. It is not the Henri Cartier-Bresson decisive moment captured, yet it is nevertheless the product of specific materials, specific conditions on a specific day, the specific temperature, the specific light, in a specific year. The foldtograms can fold and unfold, change shape, and they contain the promise of new manifestations in future contexts.



Joy Episalla, *pillow 2*, 1999, chromogenic print mounted to plexiglass, triptych, 40 × 177 inches. Photo by Joy Episalla. Courtesy of the artist.

KMSAIDS activism has played a significant role in your life, particularly through your involvement in the queer art collective fierce pussy. How has collective building and artmaking informed your individual studio practice?

JEI would say that my involvement with AIDS activism preceded, and was distinct from, my involvement in fierce pussy, which started in 1991, and we are still at it today. Nonetheless, whenever you come together in a group, a collective, like we do in fierce pussy, we all bring something from our individual practice and lives. The way we look at things or construct things are brought to bear on a project, and then vice versa can happen too. One takes in the engagement with the group—impressions, an underpinning of something, or a way of thinking—which can reverberate and affect my studio practice. There's more of a flow or osmosis there.

KMSWe've spoken before about how the AIDS crisis collapsed time for queer people. What are the ways in which the AIDS crisis has changed your experience and understanding of time?

JEGoing through something as deep, dark, and complicated as the AIDS crisis in the late '80s and early '90s, and now looking back on it with hindsight, it was a certain number of years that felt incredibly compact and simultaneously huge. It felt like a very long time, before the cocktail became available, which was in 1996. And what I've held onto from that relationship to time is: I'm trying to slow time down for the viewer. That slowing down or the paying of attention to what's around you is a position I am interested in; not just observing, but something more active, which has to do with paying attention to the present moment one finds themselves in. I've been thinking a lot lately about how one carried out an action or followed through with certain tasks. Because you had to be paying close attention all the time; life and death were in close proximity. They always are, but back then it was a constant, daily tug of war. You had to be constantly aware to figure out the right moment to do something, to react, to make a move. Whether it was caring for someone close to you in the hospital, recognizing an emergency situation, or doing an action, there were ways in which one paid attention, a vigilance, and also a way of trying not to call too much attention to oneself. Especially if it was a situation where you had to be more covert. This was a skill I garnered from that time that I now use in my work, and it has probably gotten even more elaborate and almost like second nature to me.



Still from Joy Episalla, *As long as there's you, As long as there's me*, 2022, single channel video, 34 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

KMSI had the honor of viewing *As long as there's you, As long as there's me*," a video you have been working on for over a decade and are planning to premiere at Palais de Tokyo in 2023 as part of *Chapter Seven: arms ache avid aeon: Nancy Brooks / Joy Episalla / Zoe Leonard / Carrie Yamaoka: fierce pussy amplified*. The video is a deeply moving compilation of nonperformative performance, consisting of footage you've collected over the last eighteen years overlaid with a poetic narrative. What inspired this project? And how does it feel to be sharing it after all these years?

JEAll of the footage are moments I shot where I was present. It is not staged or appropriated in any way. I'd been thinking about the connection between all these different fragments of footage and about the idea of nonperformance/performance for a long time. And then the pandemic hit, and we were deprived of community and live performance. The central thread that runs through the film is: How do you know when the performance is happening?

You are seeing these moments when performative acts are taking place, but there is no audience. So you, the viewer, become the audience as I'm showing you; I'm letting you be the audience. Which is also where the title comes in: *As long as there's you, As long as there's me*. I am interested in deep listening and deep looking. I am interested in what happens when people are not performing for an audience but doing the work, or dancing the dance, or singing the passages over and over, to no one. I want you to see the work happen, not fully formed, yet somehow raw and whole.

It took me a long time to recognize how these moments of footage all fit together. I felt protective of it in a certain way. I feel somewhat exposed because there are a lot of things in the film that are deeply personal to me. They are not only moments I was observing; I was a part of it all in some way. I was in it, having that experience. They are all lived moments.

KMSI can't wait for it to be out in the world. It's truly magnificent. Thank you, Joy.

[Joy Episalla: crack fold burn bright](#) is on view at Tibor de Nagy in New York City until August 5.

Ksenia M. Soboleva is a New York-based writer and art historian specializing in queer art and culture. She holds a PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.