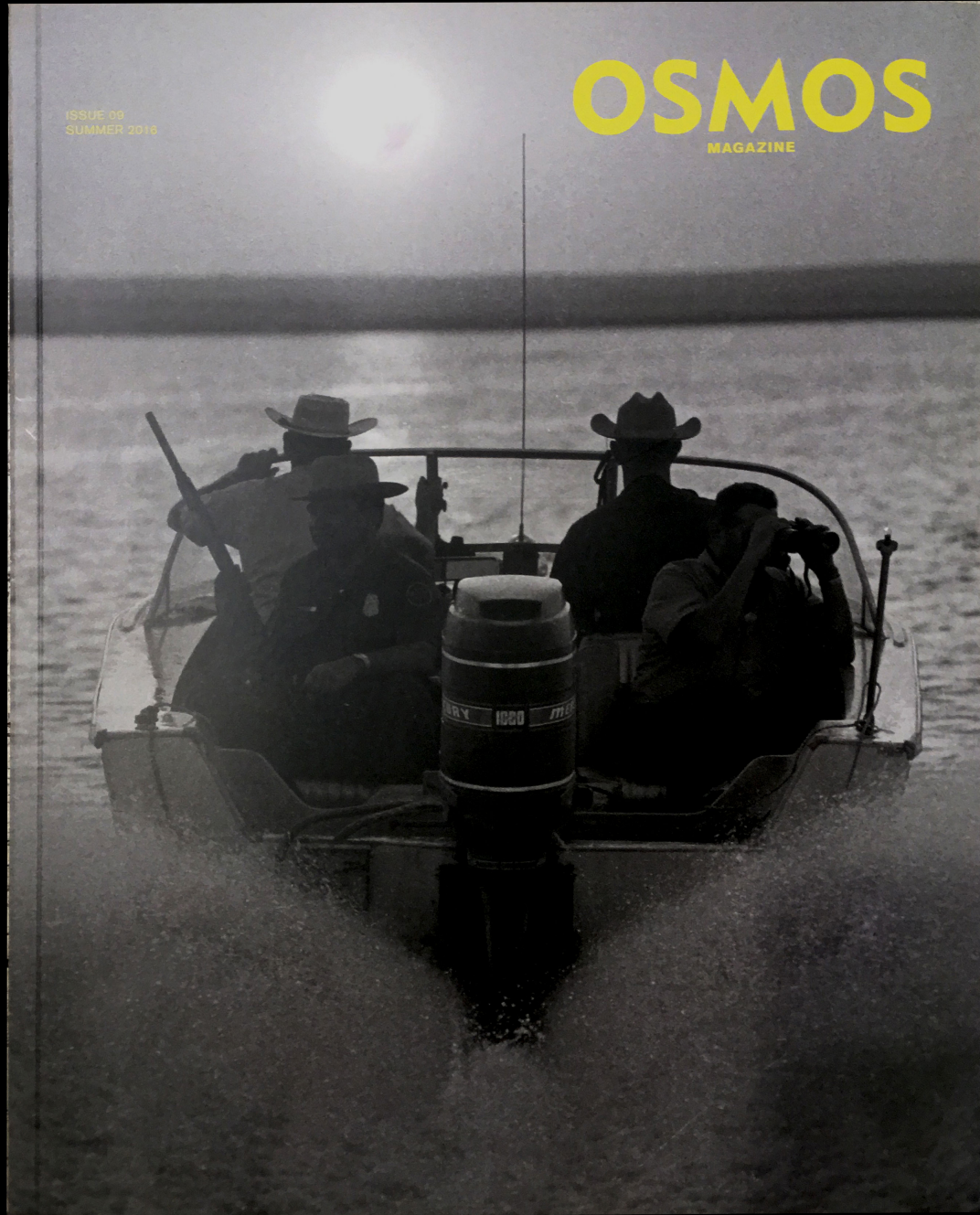


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THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY.

BY TOM MCDONOUGH

The hotel room has almost always been a paradoxical miniature of the ideal bourgeois domestic sphere, a version of that space of privacy and retreat reduced to a minimal bodily envelope. The intention is to attend to physical and psychosomatic needs in as limited a perimeter as possible: sleep, hygiene, nourishment—if only in the form of the minibar—light and air. Yet I insist on saying paradoxical because, of course, the hotel room is a *home from which one is always leaving*.

Observers have often, and understandably, compared Joy Episalla's work with that of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and indeed the empty beds in the hotel room photos of her "TV" series bear more than a passing resemblance to the image of a recently vacated double bed in latter's well known *Untitled* billboard project of 1992. There, the simple black-and-white photograph, blown up to architectural proportions, ruptured fixed boundaries between the public and the private in what was a gesture at once of mourning for his recently deceased lover and of defiance toward a socially imposed silence and invisibility. Whatever the similarities in iconography, however, Episalla's photographs occupy a much more ambiguous terrain, depicting a space that is always already *not* public and *not* private, a transitional realm ambivalently posed between stable spatial and social categories. Like the beds themselves in their disarray, clear distinctions are here un-made. A home in which we cannot stay.

The rootedness and permanence with which we continue to associate domesticity is necessarily denied this temporary abode, a quality that perhaps lends this space its slightly uncanny effect. Everything is present to make us feel at home, although we are not at home; this is not our bed, not our towels, not our robe. A simulacrum of the domestic. The hotel room is, we might say, a home without a hearth.

Except, that is, for the television, our electronic hearth. Practically every hotel room, no matter how small or how poorly appointed, features a set, sitting atop a dresser or attached to a wall. Insomniac travelers lay in its blue filtered light, flipping through unfamiliar channels at odd hours of the night, searching for distraction or reassurance as jetlag and the intermittent sounds from neighboring rooms make sleep elusive, TV casualties. But what should be comforting tends only to exacerbate our anxiety, with the unceasing flow of images across the screen a continual reminder that we too are occupying a transitory space, we too are in movement, here tonight and gone tomorrow. Better to switch it off and just stare at the dull reflection of the room on its gray surface.

Episalla began photographing moments like these almost twenty years ago, empty images of hotel rooms reflected in whether around the country—Houston, Buffalo, Chicago, Philadelphia—or across Europe—Naples, Madrid, London, Barcelona—she started to ponder how to translate photographically her experience of the anonymous architecture of tourism. One solution was to shoot the corridors of her hotels, as in the large-scale *Hallway #1* (2004), a view down a banal, somewhat down-at-the-heels passageway. (Episalla has also photographed escalators and elevator doors and included video pieces in this "Hallway" series.) But these pictures, with their deep perspectives and strong, almost cinematic, suggestions of narrative, are not the only transcriptions of those spaces she undertook. In these same years, Episalla was turning her camera on the interior of her hotel rooms, seen mirrored in TVs present in the space. Narrative is present here, too, but in a subtly provocative and unsettling form.

In hotels, television screens face the bed; their anonymous designers long ago determined that what travelers want is the reproduction of the hetero space of the bourgeois bedroom—to lie down and watch TV. But this also implies that, when it is turned off there are other possibilities. The screen can become a mirror of a space for intimacy, a dark speculum reflecting back to us the cocoon we, either alone or with our lovers, have formed during our fleeting stay. Episalla's photographs take advantage of this curious spatial arrangement. The "TV" series is a catalogue of unmade beds, disarrayed clothing, coffee cups perched on nightstands, all seen in the somewhat distorted convexity of the screen. Narrative is unavoidable here, but it is ineffable—a nagging solitude, what one critic aptly described as "some existential adventure pursued alone in strange places ... a low-temperature sort of romance." These quiet, empty rooms—she always shot them as she was departing, at the end of her stay—are defined, then, precisely as what is about to be *left behind*. We never see the spaces face to face, as it were, but only ever through their reflection, captured in the moment we abandon them.

The "TV" series picks up a longstanding thread of Episalla's photography: its concern for the traces we leave on the objects that are closest to us, on our bedding, our clothes, and the like. In her work these become, as Michael Cunningham eloquently writes, something like "the ghosts of their users." Such items are never imaged new, pristine, but always marked by the evidence of our interaction with them—one wants to say humanized, except the human is precisely what is absent from pictures like *Pillow #2* (1999)



or *Mattress #1* (2002). Like the photograph itself, the indexes of our contact with these objects can only demarcate *what has been*—they are so many signs, not of life, but of death. (Or, as Cunningham puts it, "we live in bodies, we live in rooms, and we eventually leave them.") "The rooms where I've shot the TVs feel full of the traces and histories of myself as well as many others who have occupied the room before me," Episalla notes, "a room which has been used by many people over time, which is 'pristine' when one enters and becomes one's intimate site. A continual flow between absence and presence." So of course they are, in some sense, memorials, a quality heightened by the way she mounts her c-prints onto thick Plexiglas, which turns the thin photograph into something weighty and obdurate ... and which ensures that the suppleness of represented fabric can only be apprehended through the unyielding, if transparent, support. This memorial function cannot be separated from Episalla's AIDS activism and is of a piece with the work of memorializing she has in recent years undertaken in collaboration with her colleagues in the collective

fierce pussy—which, as Episalla explains, "originally came together in the early 1990s in the midst of the AIDS epidemic as a way to address lesbian visibility and pleasure," and which returned "to start addressing the legacy of the AIDS crisis, bringing it up to the minute" in the installations such as *For the Record*, realized at White Columns in 2010.

The "TV" series, however, may also be thought of as a memorial to their own time. Although the earliest works in the series, such as that taken in Naples, date back to 1998, she only began printing them some seven years later, in 2005—that is, at the height of the violence associated with the American invasion of Iraq and during a moment of profound political pessimism if not despair. The televisions whose screens are blank in her photographs would otherwise be broadcasting the twenty-four-hour news cycle of Bush and Cheney's mendacious war. In that context, the hotel room, with its transitory quality and its alienation, might simply condense the broader contradictions of living through that time. In Episalla's photographs we see those years again, but as through a glass, darkly.



