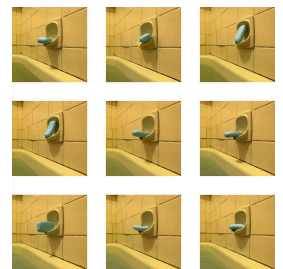




20 seconds (#5 of 9 photographs)

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Artist's statement: This work, consisting of a series of nine photographs (**AVAILABLE INDIVIDUALLY, or as a FULL SET**) continues the artist's long-term approach to artistic research and production, namely, of *Undoing Architecture*. In this case, the nine photographic variants of a built-in soap-dish holder and, more significantly, the bar of soap it houses, serve as a catalyst for opening up lines of flight concerning the societal and social undoings caused by the advent – and stubborn persistence – of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Soap, and how, why, when, and for how long we use it, has transcended its previously accepted quotidian reason for being. In the context of the pandemic, personal hygiene and cleanliness have

been subsumed by a programme consisting of washing with soap, repeatedly, as a forced ritual, driven by fear and uncertainty. We now, close to 8 billion of us, wash our hands more often than ever. And we find ourselves – when doing so – invariably thinking deeply about something that we did in a much more casual and unthinking manner before the pandemic became a reality.

As an artist, restricted in early 2020 to the confines of my domestic space, my bathroom – especially as the colder winter months set in – offered a space of calm, comfort, warmth and reflection. The way this simple space is configured means that the soap-holder and the sculptural, bodily characteristic of the soap itself sit within my immediate field of vision, as a focal point of contemplation. Although I'd noticed and even snapped the sculptural qualities of the soap in the past, the deeply reflective mode brought on by the pandemic extended this observation to another 'place', a liminal one. In this two-by-two meter room of relative calm, I began to photographically consider and explore the presence and plasticity of the generic consumer object of a bar of soap, an item I'd very much taken for granted until the advent of the Covid era elevated its usefulness and meaning in such pronounced and highly mediated ways.

Photography is a mode I often use to collect and reflect on various aspects of possible artistic projects. Its uncomplicated immediacy as an instrument and medium offered a useful way to capture, and then dwell on and convey, my musings on something I'd spent little to no time thinking about critically before. The potent relationship between soap, a *visible* 'tool' and its mechanics and capability to dispel an *in-visible* virus, warding off vectors of disease and, at worst, death, have preoccupied me since.

In the series of nine photographs comprising this work, the soap-bar, an ostensibly simple readymade, is placed centre stage in a deadpan manner, in the mode of conceptual photography. This portrayal of a common, relatively cheap, accessible and seemingly unremarkable everyday consumer item opens it up to other forms of reflection and projection. Upon engaging this work, what is suggested within each of the nine photographs as well as relationally, between and across the image 'field', is a complication of the conventions of the signifier-signified axis.

In the photographs, the soap's different 'poses' introduce a performative quality to the subject under investigation. This strategy of depiction introduces the potential for lightness and humour, even sensuality. These qualities are all generative and affirming aspects of daily life, desperately necessary, it seems to me, during a time of grave concern, uncertainty, anxiety and loss on a personal and universal scale. Such qualities may inform ways for us to frame and reframe ideas of wellbeing both individually and collectively. The soap is, at the same time though, true to its material nature, slippery and ambivalent. Its traditional significance attached to comfort and cleanliness has been severely tilted towards highlighting and even embodying registers of discomfort and perpetual anxiety. In these photographic depictions, soap can be simultaneously read as homely *and* uncanny. Its existence offers comfort, yes, but each time we use it its vanishing becomes more inevitable, an apt metaphor for the way that each time we use – or misuse – our lives and environments, their respective vanishings become more certain. The single-point perspective of these serial photographs is reinforced by the gridded materiality of the ageing and dated bathroom tiles that diminish towards the vanishing point of each of the images. Both the slow entropic creep of the shrinking soap and the diminishing perspective in the images in this series amplifies a harsh reality. Namely that of a looming 'vanishing point' made all too real by the philosophical dispositions we've been collectively and individually thrust into when it comes to the ways we now consider, protect and value our current – and strangely endless – uncertain reality.

Frame	None
Edition Size	7
Medium	Printed with Epson Ultrachrome pigment inks on archival Ilford Gold Fibre Gloss (100% Cotton Rag, 300gsm)
Height	42.00 cm
Width	42.00 cm
Artwork Height	40
Artwork Width	40
Artist	Alexander Oppen
Year	2021

