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LA NOTTE / THE NIGHT

Simon Marcus Swale

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BACKGROUND

This article charts the development and resolution of the body of work *La Notte / The Night*: 12 objects of powder-coated aluminium, and a related 1:12-minute video. These were initiated while I was a participant in the Handshake Project, a mentorship programme for emerging makers of contemporary jewellery in Aotearoa New Zealand. Each mentorship cycle typically accepts 12 participants, matching them up with a mentor for a two-year period. During my time as a participant of Handshake6 (the sixth iteration of the Handshake Project) from January 2020 to October 2022, participants came together for frequent online meetings and facilitated workshops with established artists, as well as producing a series of onsite group exhibitions. Handshake6 concluded with a final exhibition at Northart, a public gallery in Northcote, Auckland, from August to October 2022.

Synchronous with my participation in Handshake was the global COVID-19 pandemic. *La Notte / The Night* attempted to capture the experience and atmosphere of the pandemic in the moment, particularly the experience of isolation. While initially undertaken as a Handshake exercise, *La Notte* was developed further in response to a call for artists to submit work for an inaugural jewellery-related video exhibition, "SMCK ON REEL," part of the annual jewellery festival known as *Schmuck*, held in Munich from 6 to 10 July 2022.

BLACK

The work *La Notte / The Night* was first developed during Handshake6 as a video-making exercise under the direction of jewellery artist Estela Saez Vilanova. Vilanova was introduced to our group in May 2021 and conducted a series of online workshops. In one, Vilanova allocated each Handshake participant a colour from which we were to develop an exhibition concept (rather than a fully realised work for an exhibition). This concept was to be represented through a short, one-minute video. I was allocated the colour black, and it was from the resulting exhibition concept that *La Notte / The Night* continued to develop.

Black inspired a range of responses in me. While Aotearoa New Zealand has a reputation for a black-dominated fashion aesthetic, Ōtepoti Dunedin, where I am from, has its own reputation for a certain gothic sensibility, one embraced by local fashion designers such as Margarita Robertson of the brand NomD. As a supposed little Edinburgh in the South Pacific, Dunedin's colonial architecture and dank climate contributes to this sensibility. However, it was the experience of a swift-moving pandemic and the requisite lockdown that brought a heightened and ominous tone to our environment; the queues of masked individuals awaiting entry to the supermarket was a dystopian experience to behold.

It was the depths of winter, and the first lockdown had already taken its toll. A second lockdown had ended in most of the country, but Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland remained locked down and isolated. The news media was saturated with COVID: government policy updates, vaccination requirements, stats on infections, hospitalisations and deaths. The world had changed swiftly, and articulations of the 'new normal' only enhanced a perception that this state of affairs would have an ongoing impact. It was during a return journey home from the supermarket one night that the

concept of COVID as a long, dark journey coalesced in me. Driving alone through the rain and dark, with just the occasional flash of headlights coming towards me, I recorded on my phone, through the windscreen, footage that would become the central component of *La Notte*.

My initial exhibition concept, in response to Vilanova's exercise, was for a black-painted room. In the middle of the room would be a large table, wrapped in black plastic, for the display of work. Above this, low hanging lights would themselves be wrapped in black plastic. Along one black wall would hang spotlit objects. On an adjacent wall would be a projection of the footage captured while driving through the rain. Opposite this, another projection, a segment of the film *La Notte* by Michelangelo Antonioni (1961), from which I borrowed the title for my own work. Shot in black-and-white, and like all of Antonioni's films of this early 1960s period, *La Notte* meditates on a sense of alienation in increasingly industrialised post-war Italy. Ennui haunts this film; an inability to communicate impacts relationships, and characters seem to drift through their situations limply, as if in a daze. This seemed to me comparable to the isolation and disconnection experienced during COVID lockdowns and in the periods of uncertainty that followed.

Having developed the concept, I made a diorama of the exhibition, and then a video simulating an exhibition walk-through, a montage that included the above-mentioned video footage.

Shortly after the Handshake Project came a call for artists to submit work for a jewellery-related video exhibition, "SMCK ON REEL," part of *Schmuck 2022*. *Schmuck* is the premier contemporary jewellery event on the international calendar, part of the annual craft exhibition held each year in Munich, Germany. Curated by Loukia Richards and Christoph Ziegler, and occupying two galleries in Munich for the duration of *Schmuck*, "SMCK ON REEL" was the first international jewellery exhibition focusing on video work. My contribution was a new video created, inspired by and extending upon the initial video created for Handshake.



Figure 1. Slmon Swale, *La Notte*, video still.

ATMOSPHERE AND TIME

The final video dispensed with the exhibition theme and the footage from Antonioni's film was also removed, in part due to copyright concerns, but also for simplicity and clarity. Atmosphere was now the main focus, and relied upon the footage of driving through the rain at night: repetition and monotony; the rhythm of the wiper blades; the white noise of the constant rain; and a sense of infinitely repeating time in the flickering repetition of the white centrelines and the occasional flashing past of headlights from passing cars.

Also pivotal to the atmosphere of the original video footage was the music playing on the car stereo: Glenn Gould's piano interpretation of JS Bach's *French Suites* (1722-25). Driving alone, the plaintive, mournful strains of the music transported me into a distinctively filmic experience, enhanced by the view being framed by the windscreen while all else remained in darkness. For copyright reasons I replaced the Gould track with a similarly haunting creative commons recording of another Bach piano piece.¹

From 'tuning in' to the atmosphere of the video came a greater sensitivity to time which, during the period of the pandemic, seemed fundamentally altered, utterly distinct from that of previous life. I considered the notion of 'COVID time,' a kind of suspended time outside of our usual experiences. Perhaps this is what made lockdowns so psychologically difficult? COVID time induced a sense of indefinite waiting; waiting for a workable vaccine, waiting for things to become better. But would things become better? How could we feel confident in the future as new strains of the virus emerged? Fear, dread and, for many, grief dominated.

COVID time could seem rapid (a quickly changing situation, the virus mutating, moving in waves and becoming increasingly infectious and transmissible) as well as, more frequently, cripplingly slow. Aching and insufferable, lockdown is an experience of stiflingly limited repetition, of waiting and hoping. Days drift by and blur, fading and merging into one another; time interminable. We live this experience collectively, yet so often in isolation from each other. We seem stuck in what Maurice Blanchot calls an "unbearable present ... a present without end and yet impossible as a present."² Hope fades, and waiting transforms into suffering.

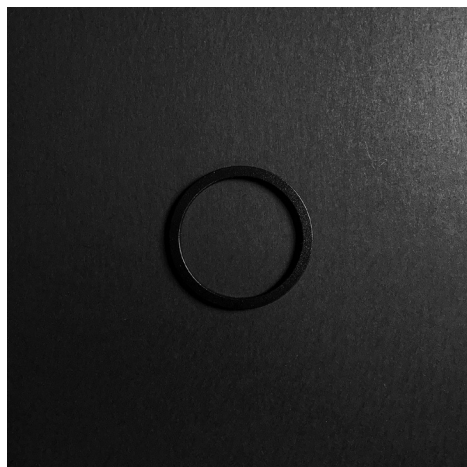
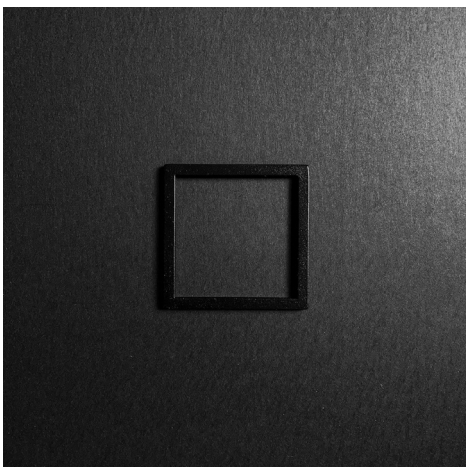
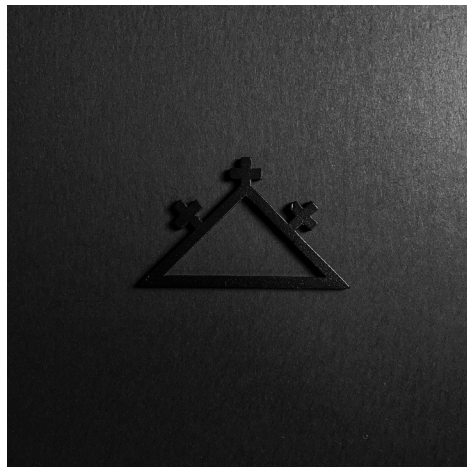
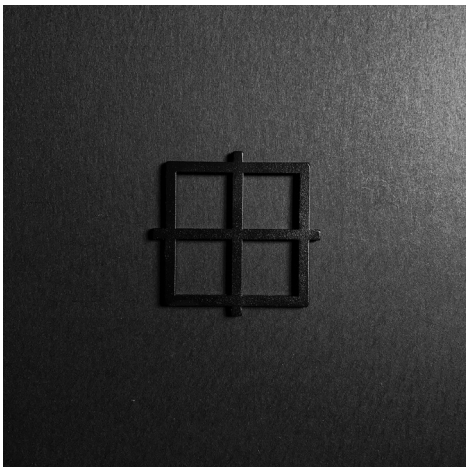
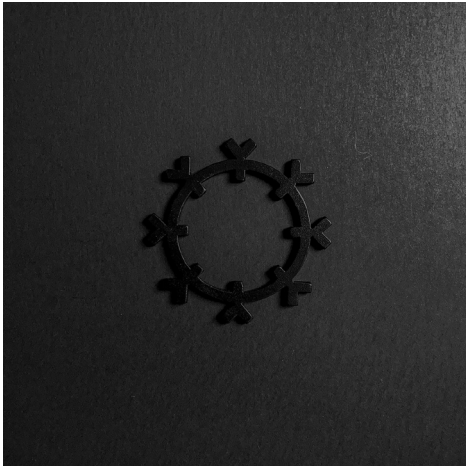
The sense of time described here is not quantifiable by seconds or minutes, but is a felt and embodied time; the body enveloped in time. French philosopher Henri Bergson defined this experience of subjective lived time as *durée* or 'duration,' distinct from the objective time of watches, clocks and calendars. He recognised that time is not always experienced as ordered, sequential and predictable. Time, as it is lived, felt and acted, cannot simply be quantified by science, but is nonetheless real and true.³ COVID has presented us with an uncertain time, an uncertain future. Waiting becomes open and potentially unending: "waiting is not to be passed through."⁴ COVID time is a time endured.

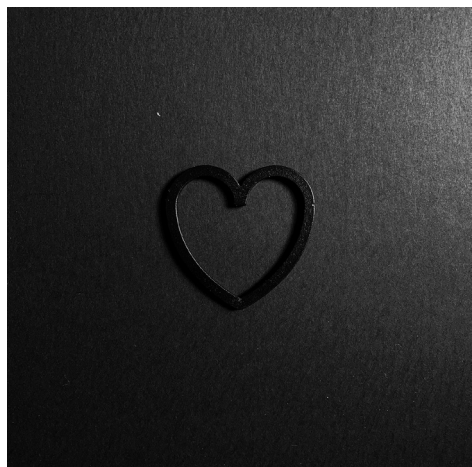
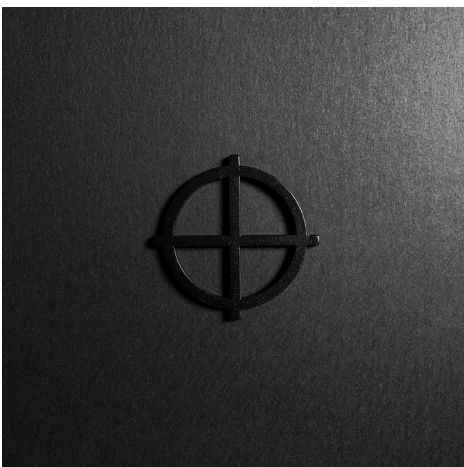
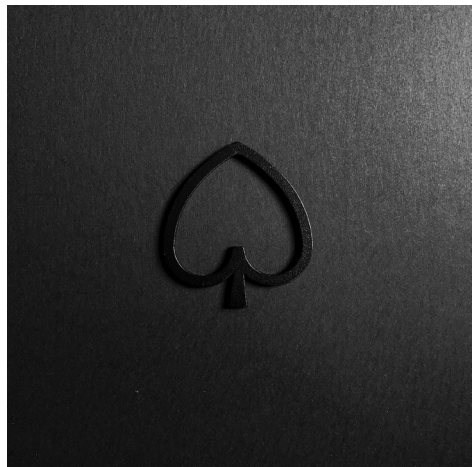
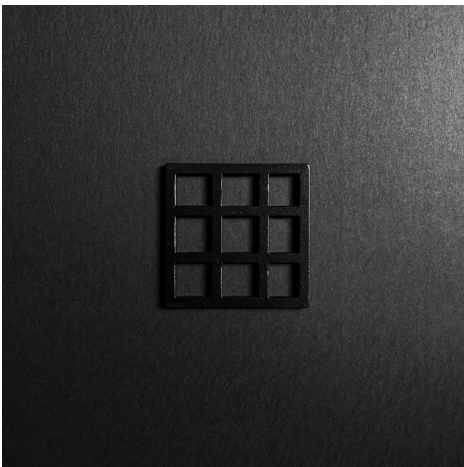
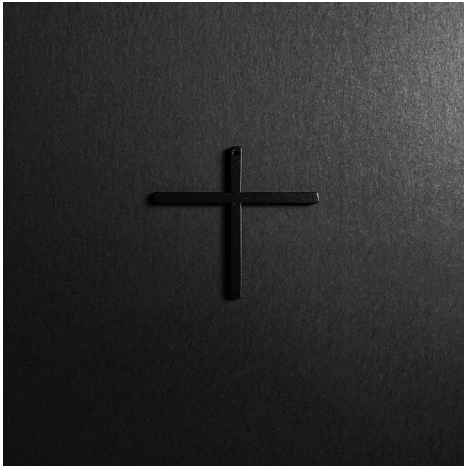
OBJECTS

Inspired by the initial concept video, I made a set of 12 physical objects that would feature in the final video, while also being autonomous works in their own right as contemporary jewellery. Approximately 65mm in height and width, each piece is cut from 4mm aluminium sheet. These objects act as a series of charms, amulets or talismans, each an abstraction of the COVID experience. Finished with black powder coating, these objects were shot against a black ground and edited to appear and dissolve as the original car footage played out.



Figure 2. Simon Swale installation view of the 12 objects.





CONCLUSION

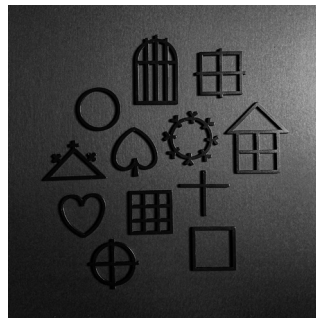
La Notte attempted to capture something of the unique historical moment of a global pandemic, at the time it occurred. It was created out of the boredom, frustration and anxiety of the pandemic experience, but also in the belief that after the dark night will come a bright dawn.

The video *La Notte / The Night; Love, Loss and Loneliness in the Age of Isolation* was first shown at Galerie Weltraum and Bayerischer Kunstgewerbeverein, Munich, as part of *Schmuck 2022* (6 to 10 July 2022), in the exhibition “SMCK ON REEL,” the world’s first video festival dedicated to jewellery. Since then, “SMCK ON REEL” has been shown at the Grassi Museum, Leipzig; the Romanian National Library, Bucharest (as part of Romanian Jewelry Week); the Museum of Applied Arts & Design, Vilnius; and the National Museum of History of Ukraine, Kyiv.

The jewellery objects that feature in the video work were first shown alongside the video in “Whānui,” a curated exhibition of Handshake alumni, at The National, Otautahi Christchurch, in October 2022.

The video can be found on the artist’s Youtube channel <https://youtu.be/PMKDg63sW4c> and is available also on the *SMCK Magazine* website <https://www.smck.org/smck-reel/munich2022.html>.

Simon Marcus Swale (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5830-3034>) is an artist, designer and educator based in Ōtepoti Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand, whose explorations in body adornment extend across fashion, jewellery and the wider fields of art practice. Simon completed an MFA in contemporary jewellery at the Dunedin School of Art in 2020 and was a participant in the Handshake mentorship programme from 2020 to 2022. Simon is currently senior lecturer in the School of Design, Otago Polytechnic / Te Pūkenga.



- 1 Variation 15 of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, courtesy of Kimiko Ishizaka and MuseScore.com. The Open Goldberg Variations (<https://www.opengoldbergvariations.org/>) is a project by pianist Kimiko Ishizaka and MuseScore.com, intended to create a public domain recording and score of JS Bach’s masterpiece, *Die Goldberg Variationen* (BWV 988).
- 2 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 44.
- 3 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988).
- 4 Harold Schweizer, *On Waiting* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 112.