

BEING TOGETHER IN SPENCER TUNICK’S ART IN A TIME OF SELF-ISOLATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the “Stay Apart Together” project, which was carried out by photographer Spencer Tunick, who is known for his nude body installations in public spaces with the participation of many people, during the self-isolation period of 2020, which was the most difficult year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Tunick brought together the participants, who were in quarantine in different parts of the world due to the necessity of staying at home, through online conference platforms in “Stay Apart Together”. The participants posed for their own cameras in line with the directions of the artist. Screenshots of various compositions created with the participation of different numbers of people were taken by Tunick and exhibited as a photograph. In this study, it is aimed to discuss the “Stay Apart Together” in the context of “the effect of art on people during the self-isolation period.” For this purpose, the photographs exhibited in “Stay Apart Together” were examined, and the "naked body" phenomenon, which was the focus of Tunick's artistic approach, was discussed within the framework of the "self-isolation and art" unity. In this project, in addition to the naked bodies of the participants; their houses, the room they live in and their belongings are also included in the image. Therefore, this project forms a basis to evaluate the concepts of "private" and "public" in an artistic framework. In this respect, the project has been considered as a practice in which privacy is transformed into an art object. Moreover, the sociological and psychological effects of an online meeting for art held during a deadly epidemic on the participants and the viewers looking at the resulting photographs were investigated. As a result of the information obtained, “Stay Apart Together” has been evaluated as an example of relational art, showing that the structure of art that contributes to “inter-human collectivism” is kept up-to-date. As a matter of fact, “Stay Apart Together” also contributes to the artistic aspect of the global digital transformation and the transforming art experience in the context of bringing the pandemic to life during the most challenging self-isolation period.

Keywords: Covid-19, Self-isolation, Art, Body, Privacy.

COVID-19 PANDEMİSİ KARANTİNA DÖNEMİNDE SPENCER TUNICK’İN SANATINDA BİR ARADA OLMAK

ÖZ

Bu araştırma, kamusal alanlarda çok sayıda insanın katılımıyla gerçekleştirdiği nü beden enstalasyonları ile bilinen fotoğraf sanatçısı Spencer Tunick’in, Covid-19 pandemisinin en zorlu geçen 2020 yılının karantina döneminde gerçekleştirdiği “Stay Apart Together” projesine odaklanmaktadır. Evde kalma zorunluluğu nedeniyle dünyanın farklı bölgelerinde karantinada olan katılımcılar “Stay Apart Together” projesinde, çevrim içi konferans platformları aracılığıyla bir araya getirilmiştir. Katılımcılar, sanatçının

yönlendirmeleri doğrultusunda kendi kameralarına poz vermişlerdir. Farklı sayılarda insanın katılımıyla, çeşitli kompozisyonlardan oluşan ekran görüntüleri sanatçı tarafından alınarak, birer fotoğraf halinde sergilenmiştir. Bu çalışmada “Stay Apart Together” projesini, “karantina döneminde sanatın insanlar üzerindeki etkisi” bağlamında ele almak amaçlanmıştır. Bu amaçla, “Stay Apart Together” kapsamında sergilenen fotoğraflar incelenmiş, Tunick’in sanatsal üretiminin odağında olan “çıplak beden” olgusu, “karantina ve sanat” birlikteliği çerçevesinde ele alınmıştır. Katılımcıların bedenlerinin yanı sıra; evleri, yaşadıkları oda, kullandıkları eşyaların da çevrimiçi olarak görüntüye dahil olması nedeniyle fotoğraflar; “özel” ve “kamusal” kavramları çerçevesinde tartışılmış, mahremiyetin sanat nesnesine dönüştüğü sanatsal formlar olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Ek olarak, ölümcül bir salgın sırasında gerçekleştirilen sanatsal bir buluşmanın, katılımcılar ile proje kapsamında ortaya çıkan fotoğraflara bakan izleyicilere olan sosyolojik ve psikolojik etkileri araştırılmıştır. Bu kapsamda “Stay Apart Together”, sanatın insanlar arası kolektivizme katkı sağlayan yapısının güncelliğini koruduğunu gösteren bir ilişkisel sanat örneği olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Nitekim “Stay Apart Together”, pandeminin en zorlu geçen karantina döneminde hayata geçirilmesi bağlamında, dünyada küresel ölçekte gerçekleşen dijital dönüşümün sanatsal yönüne ve dönüşen sanat deneyimine de katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Kovid-19, Karantina, Sanat, Beden, Mahremiyet.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 1990s, it has been possible to consider art as a “sphere of inter-human relations”. As the process developed with Fluxus, Happening, and Performance Arts, artists focus on communication models that they can create between people; thus the “participation” of the audience has become an integral part of artistic praxes. Technology and mass media tools of today's world have changed the forms of relationships and this transformed the artistic experience. Although the forms of communication where there is no intimacy and interiority between people continue to exist, the “togetherness” created by art maintains its currency. In this sense, art has a privileged place in collective creativity.

Although Contemporary art continues to exist in computer technologies, the artificial intelligence universe, and also the metaverse; art is not independent of the physical conditions of social affairs and current social events. In fact, the Covid-19 pandemic, which affected the whole world, transformed the art environment economically. Cultural institutions all over the world have turned to different forms of activities and exhibitions. In this respect, the pandemic accelerated the digital transformation globally and expanded the borders of the art environment. Many cultural institutions such as museums and art galleries have opened their archives to the audience digitally; online exhibitions, auctions and concerts were organized. It seems that the pandemic process has been a breaking point that paves the way for online art activities that have become widespread today.

Photographer Spencer Tunick is known for his shoots of live, large-scale installations involving naked people but when the global pandemic made it impossible for the artist to carry out the projects he had been planning, he turned his attention to an alternative form of production. Like everyone else, Tunick too was in lockdown at home on account of Covid-19 so he began working instead on an online video-conferencing digital project organized by Alonso Gorozpe, founder of Studio 333. Thus, was born their collaborative project, “Stay Apart Together”. To find volunteers willing to pose in the nude, the project invited people from all over the world to take part in it using video-conferencing technology and published an email address for them to indicate their willingness to do so. Following Tunick’s instructions, differently-sized groups of people posed using the cameras on their own computers during the video-conferencing sessions that they attended.

Distinguishing himself especially with his live installations of naked people in public spaces, in this project Tunick turns his attention to participants who are in quarantine in their own homes, thereby bringing new perspectives to the concepts of “privacy” and “publicness”. However, as a project, “Stay

“Stay Apart Together” also draws strength from the collective efforts of isolated individuals in the context of “art during a global pandemic”. In that respect then, the project may also be seen as an exploration of the position of art in our lives as the various aspects of the pandemic continue to unfold. “Stay Apart Together” was also shown as part of the “Life During Wartime: Art in the Age of the Coronavirus” exhibition organized by the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum. Tunick’s photographs are also on display on his personal Instagram page and may be viewed there as well.

Online Nudity as Performance

Perhaps the reason why the bodies are displayed naked in Tunick's artworks is to give new meanings to the bodies' contact with the world. In this respect, the phenomenon of “the skin” stands out as the main element of his works. According to the anthropologist Ashley Montagu, “the skin” is the oldest and the most efficient protector. This view confirms the primacy of the haptic realm. Montagu also notes: “Even the transparent cornea of the eye is overlain by a layer of modified skin”. (Montagu, 1986: 3). In this sense; the skin, and thus hapticity, are essential for experiencing the world. The appearance of bodies as naked skin in Tunick's art contributes to the perception of hapticity.

Referring to nudity as “a form of dress”, the English artist and author John Berger said “To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude.” (Berger, 1972: 54). According to Berger, nakedness merely reveals itself whereas nudity is on display. Concerning his own artistic creative processes, Tunick says “For me, the nude body is like a raw material” (URL-1).²⁰In this statement, the artist’s use of “nude body” rather than “naked body” may be seen as pointing to the issues of “objectivity” and “spectacle” implied by the disrobed state in his art. Thus, in the installations which Tunick has organized involving thousands of people in public spaces, the undressed bodies of his subjects do not draw attention to sexuality but rather become abstractions. In this respect then and from an artistic point of view, Tunick’s use of the naked body in his work differs from pornography: his subjects’ bodies draw no attention to their sexuality and their disrobed state seems commonplace. Ultimately each of the individual screenshots presented in the “Stay Apart Together” series may be seen as an example of performance art.

The disrobed state of the people taking part in “Stay Apart Together” while in their own homes may be explained by such concepts as straightforwardness and candidness and thus is in keeping with Berger’s dictum “To be naked is to be without disguise.” (Berger, 1972: 54). However, appearing together with other participants in online conferences while their computers’ cameras are turned on implies that their naked bodies are being displayed for the purpose of their being seen. The transformation of their naked bodies into objects of spectacle is what makes them nudes in the execution of Tunick’s art: the unclothed bodies of his participants are transformed into images in other words. Thus, it would be more correct to describe Tunick’s work (including this digital nudes project) as “human body installations”. As in much of the other work which Tunick has staged in public spaces, he makes use of nakedness as the starting point for his artistic production in “Stay Apart Together” as well; however, in this project the bodies appear to have been installed with the intention of each one delivering a unique performance of its own.



Image 1. Spencer Tunick, Stay Apart Together, 2020.
Source: URL-2

A group of people who come together with other participants they do not know through video conferencing platforms pose according to the artist's instructions, thus becoming integral to the artistic process in their capacity both as participants and as viewers. However, one could also say that the fact that the viewers are actually posing for their own cameras and not Tunick's adds an additional layer of complexity to the creative context of this project because both the settings that the participants choose to pose in and the items they allow to appear in along with themselves are of their own creation. A different performance unfolds in each and every one of the video conferencing windows. Beatriz Colomina, who is an architecture historian, theorist and curator says: "Any concept of the window implies a notion of the relationships between inside and outside, between private and public space." (Colomina, 1996: 136). It is possible to describe the digital video conference windows above (Image 2) as Colomina; windows that create the perception of "inside" and "outside". These screens turn into digital windows displaying the homes of the participants to each other and to other people. From another perspective, the performative bodies of the participants were framed. In the scenes staged in the frames, the participants' bodies are positioned by Tunick.

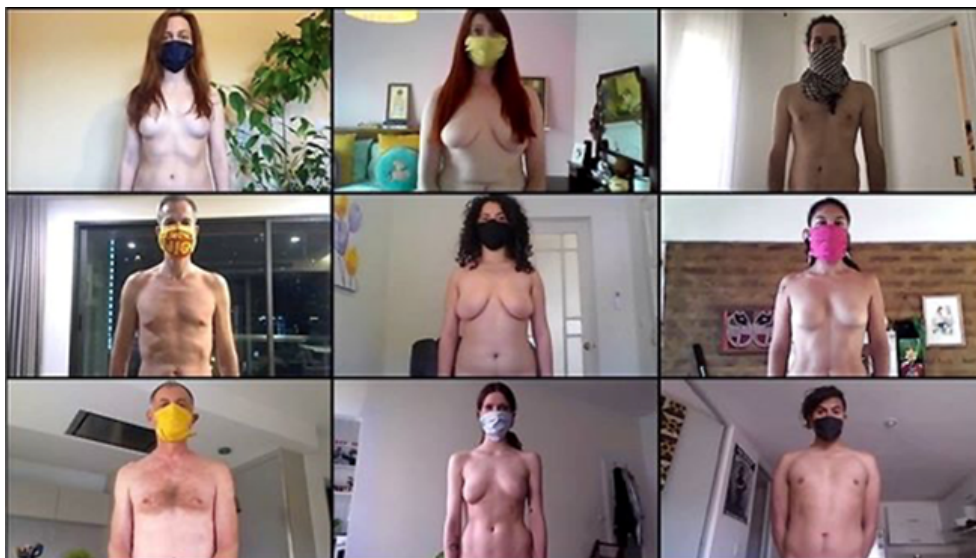


Image 2. Spencer Tunick, Stay Apart Together, 2020.
Source: URL-3

French philosopher Roland Barthes, who writes on semiotics, has the following statement about the “posing” moment: “I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or morti-fies it, according to its caprice”. (Barthes, 1981: 11). In this context, the bodies of the participants posing for their cameras re-exist with the direction of the artist, as Barthes describes as an “active transformation”. The bodies of the people appearing in the photo collages are under the artist’s control, leaving individuality aside. Especially in the screenshots created with the large number of participants, bodies as well as identities are anonymized. As Barthes noted regarding “posing”, the participants immersed themselves in a “social game”. (Barthes, 1981: 12).

As may be seen in the accompanying photograph (Image 2), Tunick had his volunteers wear masks even though they were at home and didn’t need to. That choice may reflect the artist’s critique of social-control models: given that mask-wearing is dictated by the ongoing global pandemic and in view of the pressures that such control exerts on the individual, capturing his subjects with masks on may be an expression of that criticism. Considering that Tunick is an artist who’s been arrested a couple of times on account of his work, his struggles with efforts to censor his work, and the activism that is inherent in the nature of his work, it’s possible that his choice was made as a performative action.

Another issue related to this project is as follows: Participants' feelings while in front of the camera. In these screenshots, the representations of the participants bring to mind the “feeling of strangeness” they may have over their appearance on the screen. It can be said that what is felt here is the same kind of “estrangement” that Walter Benjamin refers to as the actor’s feelings in front of the camera. Benjamin says that: “Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one’s own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public.” (Benjamin, 1968: 231). In the context of the “screen” phenomenon, unlike Tunick's other installations, people participating in “Stay Apart Together” are facing the camera like actors and actresses. Moreover, while doing this, their bodies are also naked, that is; they bring their naked body representations to the public. The state of “estrangement” accompanied by nudity that the participants may have felt seems to leave its place to the comforting feeling of being a part of art.

Publicization of Private Spaces

Finnish architect and former professor Junahni Pallasmaa states that there is a strong identity between “naked skin and the sensation of home”, and that the experience of home is essentially an experience of intimate warmth. (Pallasmaa, 2005: 58). In the customary order of social life, a person can be naked only at home. This private space is the only place where the body can remain freely as it is. The identity between the bare skin and the togetherness of the house shows itself in “Stay Together”. However, Tunick's photographic collages publicize the union of bare skin and home within the framework of an art activity. In this sense, the viewer is invited to new possibilities regarding the private life of the other person.

“Private life still has its old sense, in special distinction from *public life* (‘what he is in private life’) but it is the steady association of private with *personal*, as strongly favorable terms, that now seems predominant.” (Williams, 1985: 242). In the context of its “personal” nature, the words “private” and “public” are opposite in meaning. In that sense, one’s body, belongings, and home are all constituent elements of one’s “privacy”. In Tunick’s art, body is transformed from its state as a realm of privacy into a public object and in that respect, the concepts of “privacy and publicness” are inseparably intertwined in work that seems to interrogate the socially-created contrast between the concepts of privacy and public within a framework similar to that of Hilde Hien’s view of “public” and “private” as “correlative and covariant terms set in contrast on a scale of human construction.” (Hien, 2006: 24).



Image 3. Spencer Tunick, Stay Apart Together, 2020.

Source: URL-4

However, Hein also noted “As a condition opposite to the public, privacy is a fiction and the sanctity of the private realm is delusional.” (Hein, 2006: 32). When we consider the accompanying photograph (Image 3) in light of this assertion, the concept of “privacy” does indeed acquire a degree of elusiveness when an unclothed body appears along with the space in which it dwells. This makes it difficult to speak of any “sanctity of the private realm” because these “private realms” are transformed into public spaces by virtue of their being made objects of spectacle. In the context of publicness, it is the images that represent the end-state of performative acts that are “real”. As Barthes put it: “The age of photography corresponds precisely to the irruption of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly.” (Barthes, 1981: 98).

“Stay Apart Together” presents a complex structure in the context of “privacy and public” phenomena. When these screenshots are viewed as photographs, it can be said that the viewer’s interest is directed towards the moment when the action is performed, beyond the aesthetic perception. This may be due to the nakedness of the participants, the pose they posed, or the curiosity aroused by the details of the place they live in. However, it is possible to say that the main interest is concentrated on the moment when we come together online. South Korean writer and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han states that social media and personalized search engines set up a space of absolute closeness; here the outside has been eliminated. He mentions that this “digital vicinity” offers users only sectors of the world that please them and has turned into a space where people meet people like themselves and offer only the parts of the world that they wish. “In this fashion, it dismantles the public sphere indeed, it dismantles public, critical consciousness—and it privatizes the world. The internet transforms into an intimate sphere or comfort zone.” (Han, 2015: 35). From this point of view, Tunick’s screenshots can be evaluated not only as the privacy of the living room and the naked body, but also as the aesthetic results of a privacy created with the participants coming together in online conference platforms. Because the moment these screenshots are taken, the participants relax their public front either physically or emotionally. Therefore, an “intimacy” arises among the participants.

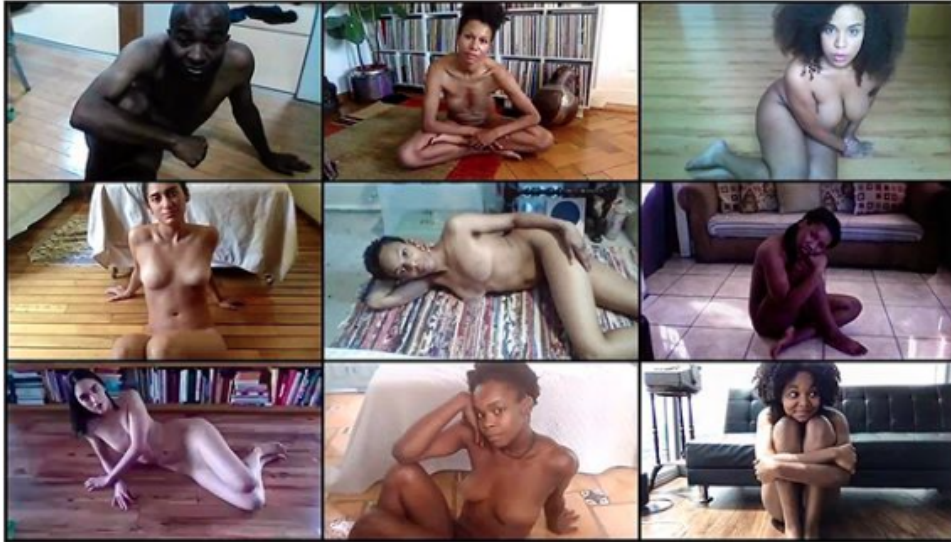


Image 4. Spencer Tunick, *Stay Apart Together*, 2020.
Source: URL-5

In his book, *Privacy and Freedom*, Academician Alan Westin names four states of privacy: solitude, anonymity, reserve, and intimacy. (Westin, 2014: 31). As the second state of privacy, the following is written about intimacy: “The individual is acting as part of a small unit that claims and is allowed to exercise corporate seclusion so that it may achieve a close, relaxed and frank relationship between two or more individuals.” (Westin, 2014: 31). Intimacy is related to the level of privacy with the other. The fact that the participants are naked in “Stay Apart Together” seems to increase the intimacy among the participants. It is a kind of intimacy that is not formed by sharing inner experience, desires or feelings with the other; but by being naked and appearing naked to the others at the same time. It seems that the state of being naked suddenly thins out the thick border between people who are strangers to each other. The powerful effect of intimacy shared by the participants may be occurring by the sense of relief coming with being naked. When expressing his views on what the sexual function of nakedness is in reality, Berger says that nakedness has a positive visual value in its own right, that the nakedness of the person before us is a confirmation, and that nakedness provokes a strong sense of relief. Concerning that relief Berger notes “She is a woman like any other: or he is a man like any other: we are overwhelmed by the marvelous simplicity of the familiar sexual mechanism.” Seeing “the other” has the effect of dispelling any mystery that may previously have existed in Berger’s view and he characterizes that relief as the relief of finding an unquestionable reality and an element of banality. By promising the familiar, ancestral mechanism of sex, this reality also presents the possibility of the shared subjectivity of sex. (Berger, 1972: 59). By bringing together the unclothed bodies of his volunteers, Tunick also seems to be inspiring a similar feeling of banality in us or, to put it another way, he appears to be showing us that the sexuality that is attributed to bodily privacy rather than to a rejection of that privacy can in fact be reduced to the banality and reality of the public space. The private is, in other words, more public than the public.

Being a Part of Art in a Time of Self-isolation

With regard to the first states of privacy, *solitude* as Westin puts it (2014: 30), Janna Malamud Smith says “*solitude* is the most complete state of privacy. A person seeking solitude separates from others so that she cannot be seen or heard, and so that she is not easily intruded upon.” (Smith, 1997: 32). It is safe to say that solitude is necessary for people and also includes introversion, seclusion, and isolation. But the kind of forced solitude as in quarantine days quickly becomes distressing. Taken from this framework, “Stay Apart Together” includes artistic forms of unchosen solitude. In addition, the participants themselves become a part of the art, together with others. Smith states that enforced or

protracted solitude is unbearable to most people and continues: “But solitude in moderation, held in check by its being a sought and limited departure from the company of others, allows freedom”. (Smith, 1997: 38). The “departure” mentioned here seems to be an example of the transformed loneliness of the participants the moment this project was carried out. There is a collective creation here, shared by the participants, who are physically alone but spiritually related to each other.

Bourriaud defines a work of art, that is focused on the production of such forms of conviviality capable of re-launching, as a “social interstice”. He describes this concept as follows: “The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system.” (Bourriaud, 2002: 16). Such a space can also be seen in “Stay Apart Together”. People co-exist in a free space while dealing with compelling circumstances such as risk of death, obligation to stay at home, uncertainty of the process. Bourriaud attributes the birth of what he calls “relational art” to the “observation of the present”. The space in which a work of relational art is exhibited is given over entirely to interaction. In Bourriaud’s view, all artists whose work derives from relational aesthetics have their own world of forms and, with one exception, they are not connected to one another in any manner or form. The exception he says is “the fact of operating within one and the same practical and theoretical horizon: the sphere of inter-human relations.” (Bourriaud, 2002: 43). From the standpoint of its incorporating audience-interaction and various communication processes of social-change methods within an aesthetic experience in the context of what Bourriaud refers to as “relational aesthetics”, “Stay Apart Together” may also be regarded as an example of relational art. In this project we see the same sort of “sphere of inter-human relations” as is found in Bourriaud’s relational art insofar as it creates an alternative form of social-interaction which makes it possible for groups of people from different parts of the world to link up with one another in the midst of a global pandemic.

While the act of being naked in that public space has always been a focal point of Tunick’s art, in “Stay Apart Together” he has replaced public spaces with private ones instead. Rather than taking the naked body into the public realm this time, in this project he captures his participants in and along with the private realms in which they dwell thereby rendering those realms public.



Image 5. Spencer Tunick, Nurses, Stay Apart Together, 2020.
Source: URL-6

As Tunick notes when he says “People still want to be part of art. And the body still resonates even in these times of isolation and being quarantined” (URL-7), people may choose to engage in artistic activities as a way of alleviating both physical and emotional distress. In that respect “Stay Apart Together” “is an impressive project in terms of social empathy and collective action emerging in the context of artistic activity. At a time when so many people are dying, a desire to be a part of an artistic undertaking while in confinement in order to ward off contagion may be associated with the positive impact that art can have on people’s lives. Indeed, that would help explain why people of every age and from so many different countries—couples, hospital medical personnel (Image 5), and people who contracted Covid-19 and recovered from it—are willing to take part in this project.



Image 6. Spencer Tunick, Stay Apart Together, 2020.
Source: URL-8

Concerning another aspect of the “Stay Apart Together” project, Tunick said during an online interview from his home in New York “There’s an element of sort of a mosaic, like this colorful, you know it’s almost like it’s stained glass.” (URL-9) This is very much the case in the accompanying photograph (Image 6), which does indeed have the appearance of a richly multihued mosaic. What is perhaps also impressive is the feelings of solidarity that one gets when looking at it. At a time when physical distancing is so vitally important, people in isolation have joined together to construct a digital mosaic.

Tobi Zausner, a researcher who explores issues related to art and psychology, says that there is “an enormous reservoir of creativity within ourselves”. In her opinion, this creativity is part of being human, reveals unimaginable inner depths, builds strength through resilience, and helps us cope with problems. What Zausner is emphasizing here is the transformative power of art as well as the positive impact of art on human psychology. In this sense, art’s greatest strength is its ability to bring about change within us so that we may change the world through our actions. From both a sociological and a psychological standpoint, the bonds between people and art are related to shared culture, to physical proximity, and to the degree to which something is deemed to be interesting. In terms of the spiritual experience that it leads to, taking part in art can inspire feelings of being a part of something that is greater than ourselves. (Zausner, 2007: 86). Zausner indicated that the greatest power of art is its ability to affect change in us and through our actions, change the world. As a spiritual experience, it may seem that we and the work of art are parts of a greater whole. In this context, it can be said that despite the challenging conditions of the pandemic, the psychology of the people who came together in "Stay Apart Together" has improved. They separated themselves from the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic and re-existed in another world where they are a part of art.

CONCLUSION

Spencer Tunick is an artist who presents uniquely fresh interpretations of analyses pertaining to the aesthetic dimensions of the naked human body. In his “Stay Apart Together” project, the artist creates a digital collage of images of bodies that, in terms of physical space, are very far from each other. The emancipatory attitude of Tunick's artistic approach towards authorities who would like to confine bodily nakedness to the home in which the body lives is also reflected in his “Stay Apart Together” series, in which naked bodies appear not in any public space but rather in spaces in which such nakedness is permissible. The body, which is imprisoned in states of privacy by the social order, gets liberated by the new meanings assigned to the phenomenon of "naked body". In online video-conferencing, the settings

and the objects contained in them that are visible in participants' windows may reveal quite specific information, raising privacy issues that go beyond the body and potentially reshaping opinions about other peoples' private lives. Just in that respect alone, we may conclude that the artist exploits an untapped power of privacy in a highly effective way in this project. Tunick liberates privacy by creating a space free from rules, restrictions and prohibitions for both himself and his audience. In this context, art creates a privileged "inter-human relations" sphere in questioning moral boundaries.

In conclusion, by bringing people together in a virtual world, the "Stay Apart Together" project gives rise to a creation process in which not just the project's volunteers but everyone who views the images take part while also enabling them all to link up with others and see how they are dealing with Covid-19 and quarantining. At a time when we are being made aware of steadily-rising death tolls, the collective awareness that emerges in the context of people coming together to perform the same act within the same practical and theoretical framework is indeed quite impressive. In this sense, the "Stay Apart Together" project is a powerful example both of the relationship between art and social change and of how people interact with one another and with the world.

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