

*What are we looking for when we gaze insistently at landscapes?*  
Alice Blackhurst on Sonia Knop's *Virtues and Filters and Bubbles*

There are reels going around at the moment of men standing at the beach, always in the same position. Hands on hips, dressed in swim shorts, they impassively survey the ocean. Sometimes captioned #dadpose, #dadsonvacation, or simply #dads, the stance is also referred to as 'the superman stand.' A popular TikTok video on the phenomenon offers this by way of further explanation: 'Every time Dads go to the beach they just stand there in a superman position, and just stare across the beach, not thinking, like they're watching the night.'

What exactly are we looking for when we gaze so pressingly at landscapes? At horizons, landforms, or at rural, urban and abstract environments? The question is obliquely raised by Sonia Knop's solo exhibition, 'Virtues and Filters and Bubbles' at nièce residency and project space in Nice, France. The title of the work evokes screens, lenses and other mediating filters, yet its premise sketches instead a kind of purposeful expansiveness: a dissolution of definitive forms and containers. It grasps at what Knop, in a monologue she authored for the project, terms an 'irreverence' or fundamental apathy. Apathy, from the Latin *a-pathos* or 'without feeling,' is a provocative stance in a mediascape constantly soliciting our likes, our preferences, and the performativity of our opinions. To be apathetic is to refuse the frantic rehearsal of our actions for other people; as well as the binary of being categorically 'for' or 'against' something. To be apathetic is to be neither. It is to present a self, to again cite Knop, devoid of 'ideas, skills or desires.'

A seven-and-a-half minute feature, 'Nice Observatory,' filmed on location in Nice in May, and presented in the format of a nine-frame video installation at nièce, forms the centrepiece of Knop's enquiries here. Beginning with a wide-angled shot of the beach of the iconic Promenade des anglais at night-time, the camera proceeds to circle the actress's inscrutable face, drifting back and forth between the tourists and the passers-by ambling the promenade, before focusing more tightly on its subject. The young woman's face then multiplies into a grid of portraits before she begins intoning Knop's bracing soliloquy, a tribute to Surrealist modes of 'automatic writing' or machine-like thinking with the ultimate ambition to become, like an automaton, emptied of all emotion. It begins: 'Got the idea by flipping through novels on amazon people had recommended, judging only by clicking on the audio examples. Triggered by the voice of a millennial narrator describing a poster of viruses on intimate parts at a gynaecologist's clinic.' In so doing, it slyly acknowledges the seriality and the virality of art in an algorithmic age in which 'originality' is a tainted concept, or where everything is an extension of 'Thought you might enjoy.'

In an essay about the philosopher, poet and activist Simone Weil, whose methods of 'observing open perception' are implicit in Knop's work, Lisa Roberston evokes 'the idea of a negative female will to abstain and follow a seemingly irrational truth to the end.' 'Virtues and Filters and Bubbles' worries at the seam between abstention and apathy, and tries to excavate the difference between these superficially synonymous states. A key part of the monologue reveals how the protagonist 'want[s] to be a little girl robot like Olympia in Der Sandman. Have promising eyes, revealing hollowness. Have nothing inside. Possibly remove organs, replace with mechanics. Then, remove feelings, until all that remains is the need for drinking, peeing, eating, walking, breathing, sleeping. These will be your new pleasures. That means you cannot go into the water — no.' Unlike the 'superman Dads' who stare unflinchingly at the ocean in a proprietary, masculine gesture, the apathetic female voice at the core of 'Nice Observatory' cannot fully face the blue sweep of the sea. To do so would be to confront her powerful desire to be engulfed by the water and therefore to escape – however briefly – omnipresent surveillance and control of her gendered female body. We look at landscapes, to again paraphrase Weil, as a 'practice of attention,' or to sharpen our contemplative abilities, but also, especially if we inhabit more precarious subject positions, to dissolve ourselves, to fold our subjectivity and our identity into the horizon.

Knop's avatar dispatches the monologue, in the film, with the ocean at her back. As she talks, other mundane, liminal spaces in Nice – not the landmark Le Negresco but motorway turn-offs, car parks and waiting rooms;

what Marc Augé famously called the ‘non-places’ or ‘*non-lieux*’ resistant to the cling of affect - flicker as a grid around her, enclosing the blankness of her features. The film, in its composition and stark, frontal delivery, reminded me a little of Sophie Calle’s series *Voir la mer*, or ‘To See the Sea,’ in which Calle photographs impoverished Istanbul residents confronting the ocean for the first time (despite the city being surrounded by the sea, her subjects were too immured by their poverty to have ever seen it). Calle’s portraits, not wanting to intrude upon these intimate moments too heavily or play the voyeur too obviously, mainly capture these germinal encounters from behind. We mainly see her subjects’ backs as they confront the ocean, whereas Knop’s daringly unfeeling character – who wants to observe herself ‘like a watch,’ she says – stares searingly into the camera here. Yet both projects converge in their refusal of absolute transparency. Indeed, despite Knop’s monologue’s stated desire to look at emotions ‘under a magnifying glass’ something about these emotions remain enigmatic and impervious. Apathy is not always an empty state, it also contains opacities. The landscape that Knop’s character contemplates is not the ocean as the possible utopian site for the reorganisation, or liquid dissolution, of the social body. The landscape that she gazes at is us.