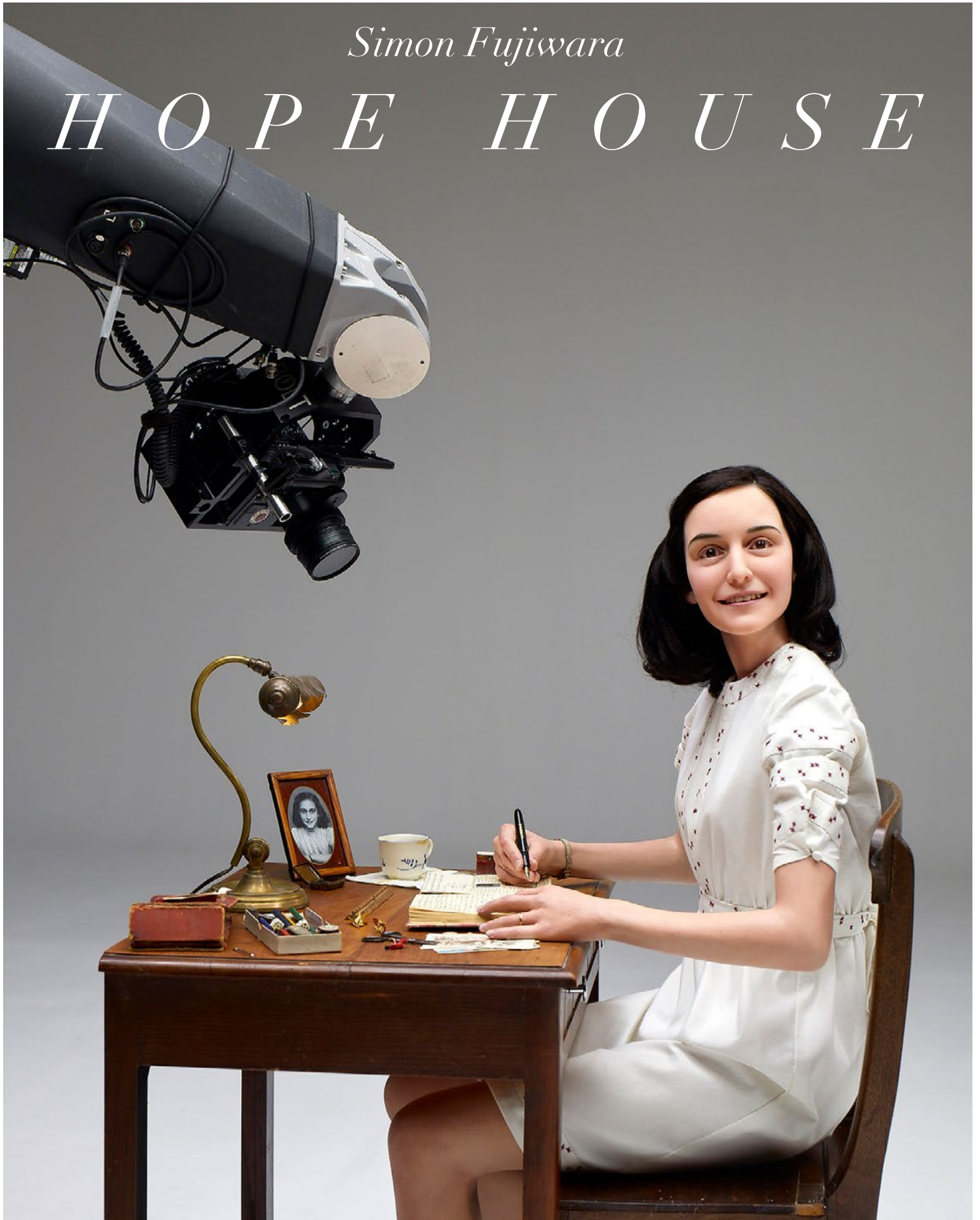


Simon Fujiwara

HOPE HOUSE





(1)

EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS STORY IS TRUE. THE PERSONS, THE EVENTS, THE PLACE AND THE STORY. EVERYTHING.

—*Anne Frank House*

Anne Frank in the Age of Influencers

Text by Simon Fujiwara

During the early days of the Coronavirus lockdown of 2020, I spent a lot more time on the sofa watching vlogs, scrolling through Instagram accounts and YouTube videos. That's how I came across Anne Frank Vlogging. Anne's dad bought her a camera and she showed me some scenes from her life; Her cat, her friends, her sister goofing around. Then she went into hiding, and she showed me the walk her family made across the city laden with suitcases, before going into the building on Prinzengracht, sneaking behind a bookcase into a series of small spaces where they lived for some two years in hiding. Then I saw her crying, terrified, as bombs drop outside. Another day she told me about the boy she was starting to fall in love with—also in hiding with her. Anne was frustrated that he didn't seem to return her advances. She had dark circles under her eyes, and appeared to be paler than before; I assumed that this was

because she hadn't seen the sun for a while. In the middle of one video, I saw Anne's mother telling her to stop filming, then later at night I listened to Anne as she complained about her mother, hoping she would never become like her. "When I grow up," she says, "I want to be remembered." Then, a banging on the door. The Gestapo? The camera cuts to black. I feel only some comfort that it is only episode 4, and there are 11 more to go. Will she vlog the rest of her story? What will happen with her internment in a concentration camp? Her death? When will the camera be taken away from her?

Last week the Anne Frank House produced a YouTube series called Anne Frank's video diaries that were released to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. Coincidentally, this launch also took place during Europe's Covid-19 containment

lockdown. The premise of the project (which was in the making long before Coronavirus) poses a simple question: What if Anne Frank had a camera? In the comments section of the Anne Frank House's YouTube channel, people are overwhelmingly positive about it. There is only a handful of antagonists, some of whom don't get it at all; "I thought she was dead" one commentator writes. There is also some confusion about Anne having a camera. The Anne Frank House engages with almost all questions, diligently. A common reply to comments is this:

Everything about this story is true. The persons, the events, the place and the story. Everything. Except for the camera, that was a diary. Anne Frank's diary. In the series you see actors who tell the story of Anne Frank.

—Anne Frank House

For those reading this in horror at the idea that someone could even ask such basic questions, it reveals why this vlog might be so important.

This simple shift of medium from pen to lens at first appeared innocent enough to me. Even before the pandemic, we had grown accustomed to looking at each other through camera lenses and screens. The Anne Frank House takes pains to explain why they authored it, so there can be no misunderstanding. There is seemingly no conceptual trickery behind this move; It's not a self-conscious commentary on social media as a medium. The vlog is pure in its intentions: to communicate a historic story in a way that is current and, due to the fact that Anne Frank did write a diary and she was a teenager, it might even be plausible that Anne would have vlogged if the Internet had been invented then. But with all the right intentions, there is no naïvete at the core of this seemingly

simple shift from one medium to another. The Anne Frank House knows this better than anybody, and this is exactly why they are doing this, and with such precision.

The primary target group for this series is young people and they tend to spend a lot of time on social media. Out of the major social media platforms that young people use (such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat), YouTube is the largest and most suitable platform for video series.

—Anne Frank House

Anne Frank died just over 75 years ago. She left a diary behind, and some years later, the house was purchased and became a museum. There are Hollywood movies, plays, exhibitions, and articles about her and she is now one of the most famous historic figures in the world. But no one, not the Anne Frank Foundation nor

the House, can take this fame for granted. People are ephemeral, they are forgotten or misremembered, and it is the work of those in charge of their legacies to keep their memory, and more importantly their message, alive and relevant for each new generation. And so, thanks to the Anne Frank House we have Anne Frank Vlogging.

Who respects more, considers more and cares more about the legacy of Anne Frank than the Anne Frank House? Perhaps more than any other iconic historical figure—Princess Diana, Gandhi, Mother Teresa—the emotional stakes are higher for Anne Frank. Do we have a deeper connection to child icons? With her brilliance, talent, beauty, and the tragedy of her demise, what other figures evoke such fierce protection? There are very few examples of historical child icons that are not fictional, which makes Anne even more rare. I can think only of Malala as a close example, but she is still alive and fast approaching adulthood, where things could get more complicated in her marriage to the media. Will we approve of Malala's decision to marry? What if she comes out as lesbian? What if she doesn't want to be a public figure anymore and disappears from the public eye? What if she inadvertently supports a cause that is revealed to be corrupt? Any number of things can derail the image of a living public figure. Anne Frank was not known to the public when she was murdered; Her contribution was finite, and therein lies a purity that has no doubt contributed to her appeal to mass audiences. As a stable figure it is unlikely Anne will, even in her memory, be re-appraised and sullied. Anne seems to now be everybody's property and navigating this level of public interest is, I imagine, a very great task for the Anne Frank House. It is almost unbelievable that the Video Diaries project has been greeted with such widespread praise. But the purpose of these video diaries is not solely to promote the legacy of Anne Frank, but to also raise awareness of the message of Anne Frank to address today's problems. In a bonus footage section, Luna

Cruz Perez—the actress playing Anne Frank in the vlogs, now out of costume—asks the public a question: *What's going on now that you think should be recorded for later?* A lot, probably. But I have a different question in my mind that I can't seem to reconcile: what actually happens when you replace the pen with a camera?

I tried my hand at vlogging during the lockdown and I learned a few things about what it feels like to be on the other side of the camera, and how that translates to the viewer. Something I would say with sincerity would often, through the jerk of the camera, an unconscious facial expression, a cut in the edit, the clothes I was wearing, or the room I was in, feel insincere or affected when I watched it back on the screen. I started to feel the need to master the camera more. I started to wear different clothes, consider what was visible in the background, and change my normal ways of expression—from my tone of voice to my facial movements—in order to more accurately portray the message I wanted...or perhaps I should say, to limit the misinterpretation of what I was saying. I was dealing with the problem of optics, and the radical increase in the amount of information video was able to instantly convey. The toolbox was suddenly vast, the response much harder to control. It started taking a lot more time, effort, and consideration. Suddenly things felt less spontaneous and more calculated; I wasn't sure who I was on screen anymore, or who I was supposed to be for my anonymous audience. I became servile and compromised. The camera became my master.

The camera lost its innocence a long time ago. No longer a piece of machinery, it is a narrator, this we all know. Years of watching reality TV, with its shaky handheld camerawork showing supposedly unscripted scenes, making or watching homemade videos, facetimeing, or uploading our Instagram posts, have given a large number of us the awareness of what it is like to operate a camera, and to manipulate how we see the content. But still, seeing the

Anne Frank Video Diaries for the first time had an uncanny effect on me. It was not about "seeing Anne Frank talk in the flesh." I had already seen that in the films of her before. It was also not about hearing words from her diary spoken, rather than in written form. It was about the editing, the camera movements, and the introduction of the camera as a character in relation to Anne. In the older film adaptations, we are not made aware of the camera as a character in this way. Anne is shot by a "naturalized" camera as if the camera was a neutral entity witnessing history respectfully. A "de-naturalized" camera has become part of the standard language of video making more recently, accelerated by the Internet and the proliferation of new, subjective histories we encounter daily. When I watched the Anne Frank Video Diaries, I felt that the camera had a voice almost equal to, and sometimes stronger, than Anne herself. This is what made it feel so fresh to me—so

appealing, so contemporary, and so fraught. Set within perfectly constructed sets, seeing Anne Frank documented through this kind of footage signals authenticity, whilst depicting something that is so close to the authentic, that the line between the two become almost impossible to locate.

Unlike other films about Anne Frank, in which Anne is often played by an older actress and which take an outside perspective, Luna, a young actress, invites viewers to connect with Anne, the girl, through her camera. The strength of the video diary lies in the personal, one-on-one approach, just like in Anne's paper diary.

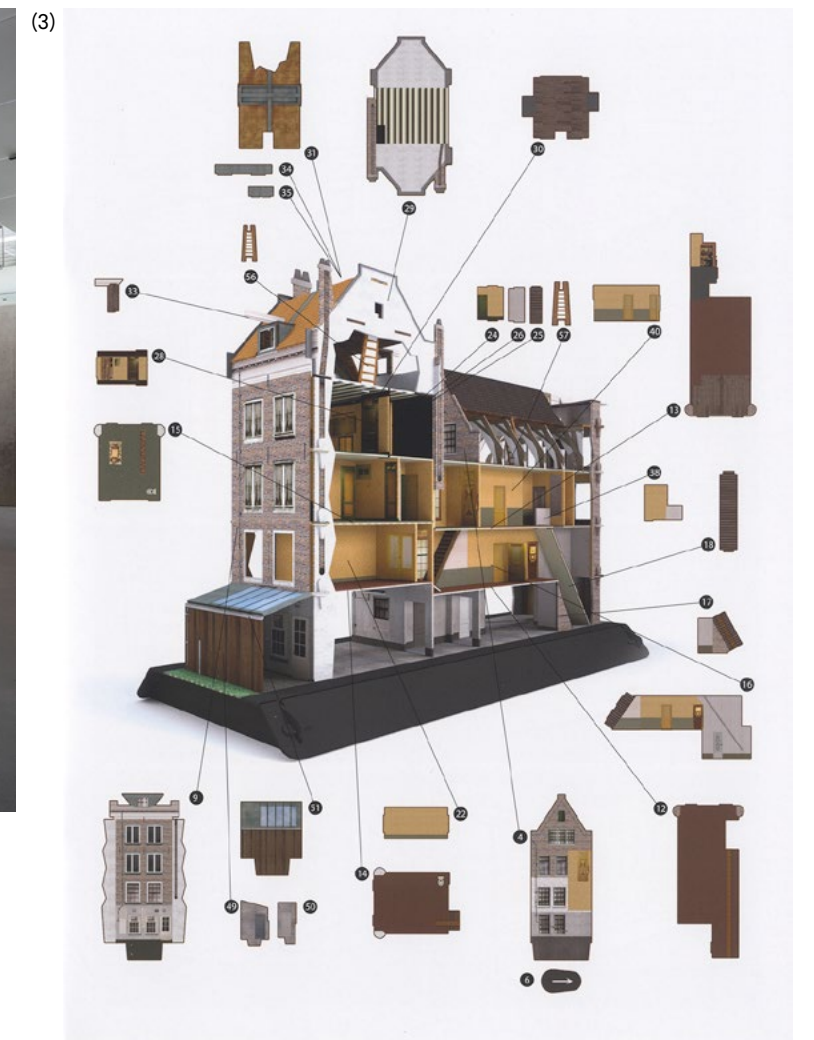
—Anne Frank House

In 2006, just one year after YouTube came into existence, a fifteen-year-old girl named Bree appeared on a channel called Lonelygirl15 with a direct-to-camera Video Blog (the word vlog had not yet been invented). In a short series of

monologues and confessionals she described her life from the confines of her bedroom in a non-descript town in America. She talked about her boy trouble, we meet Purple Monkey, her hand puppet and partner in crime, and in one episode she spruces up her room with posters. There are hints that something in her life has gone awry and that she might be in some kind of danger. She is home-schooled, doesn't seem to go out much, is interested in science, and belongs to a family that is part of a cult. The Video Blogs were not the very first of their kind to appear online, but they were the most successful with as many as half a million views for some episodes (a staggering number when we consider how early in the life of YouTube this series was). LonelyGirl15's Bree was beautiful in a girl-next-door way, her life lived largely in a bedroom turned out to be highly relatable to a mass audience. Her occasional quotes from science gurus made her a fantasy girlfriend to the male Internet



(2) Exhibition view: *Hope House*, Kunsthhaus Bregenz, 2018. Courtesy the Artist; Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Bregenz; Esther Schipper, Berlin and Dvir gallery, Brussels/Tel Aviv.



(3) Diagram of Anne Frank House, build-your-own model.

geeks and she was that “goofy-clever best friend” to the girls. When the entire enterprise was exposed as a fiction, Bree was revealed to be a New Zealand-born actress and, together with the creators of the series, they wondered how their fanbase would react, and if they could go on? Understandably the fans would be angry, disillusioned, betrayed, they wondered. But not only did people continue watching, the viewership increased manifold. Comments were varied—some expressed delight in what the project revealed—“It’s true! You just can’t know what is real or fake on the Internet!” Others, less impassioned but perhaps more interesting: “even though I know its fake, I’m going to continue watching, because I love Bree.”

Looking back at the innocence of these comments in 2006 aroused a surge of nostalgia in me. It was a time when we seemed to be just starting to discover the principles that underpin our media world, principles many of us now wish to avow. Whether you’re a media star or a president, your watchability, your entertainment value, your relatability can apparently carry you through lies, offences and even crimes. These qualities appear to be so potent and cherished that to embody them you don’t necessarily even have to exist. Hoaxes, frauds, and fictions are not new; Fairytales and storytelling from the most ancient of sources rely more on effect, than fact, to communicate their message. But perhaps what is new, and what vlogs reveal, is the power of the camera to override our most basic of instincts: to replace truth with believability.

Everything about this story is true. The persons, the events, the place and the story. Everything.
—Anne Frank House

I cried when watching the Anne Frank Video Diaries. I didn’t cry once while reading her diaries. The proximity of her face, the music, the lighting—it all got to my animal senses,

and the message behind it was momentarily relegated to second place, behind my primary experience of how I was feeling. Seeing Anne’s emotional state rather than reading it are two very different things. Gone was the critical distance I had when reading the diary of a young girl. My Anne was naughty, brave, naïve, wise, and sometimes foolish. In the vlogs I saw a girl that grew increasingly pale and tired, I saw how little she cared about her hair as the months passed in hiding. My emotional resistance was being worn down by the styling, make-up, script supervising—and eventually I gave in. I lost criticality. Perhaps there is nothing inherently problematic about this. Emotional connection to a character is the cornerstone of any meaningful story, or so we have been told for centuries. A message I took from reading the Anne Frank diary is to be aware of losing criticality. Is it a problem that while watching

the video diary, I lost criticality in a story that, at its core, is asking us to be more critical of the time we live in?

Perhaps it seems that I am romanticizing the act of writing over the act of film making. I am not. The camera is at the front line of our media future, there is no doubt about that. That is why I believe it is so important to try to understand exactly what it does as it evolves. With it, the camera brings a new set of questions which seems relevant to our era of fake news and unreliable narrators: What is it we are actually experiencing when we don’t know the truth about what we are seeing in the first place? At its core the question the camera asks us is not how real is the message, but rather how authentic is the portrayal? And so I’m left wondering what truths we are sacrificing in our endless pursuit of the real.



(4) Exhibition view: *Anne Frank's Bedroom*, 2018. Courtesy the Artist; Kunsthau Bregenz, Bregenz; Esther Schipper, Berlin and Dvir gallery, Brussels/Tel Aviv.

(5) Still from *Anne Frank Video Diary*, Courtesy of Anne Frank House, Amsterdam, Netherlands and Ray van der Bas.

(6) *Diary*, 2017, 10 original Anne Frank diary replicas produced by the Anne Frank Museum. Photo: Andrea Rosetti.



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Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

Hope House is organized by Blaffer Art Museum Jane Dale Owen Director & Chief Curator, Steven Matijcio, and this exhibition runs until March 13, 2021. We extend sincere gratitude to the Anne Frank House Museum and Holocaust Museum Houston for their partnership and counsel in this presentation. Special thanks also go to Sallie Morian and Michael Clark, Jo Dee and Cliff Wright, as well as Esther Schipper and her Gallery in Berlin for their visionary support of *Hope House*.

Lead annual support for exhibitions and programming at the Blaffer Art Museum is provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and The Farrell Family Foundation.

Major funding is provided by Leslie & Brad Bucher and the John P. McGovern Foundation.

Generous support is provided by Blaffer Art Museum Advisory Board members. The following donors sustain Blaffer Art Museum in perpetuity by giving through endowments: Cecil Amelia Blaffer von Furstenberg Endowment for Exhibitions and Programs, Jane Dale Owen Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Jo and Jim Furr Exhibition Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Sarah C. Morian Endowment, and Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Blaffer Gallery Endowment

(IMAGE TOP) Simon Fujiwara, *Likeness*, 2018.
Image courtesy the Artist; Esther Schipper,
Berlin and Dvir gallery, Brussels/Tel Aviv.



(COVER) Simon Fujiwara, *Likeness*, 2018 (detail).
Image courtesy the Artist; Esther Schipper,
Berlin and Dvir gallery, Brussels/Tel Aviv. Esther
Schipper Gallery, Berlin.