

FRIEZE

Jordan Strafer Puts the Patriarchy on Trial

At Fluentum, Berlin, the artist's films ask how justice survives when power turns abuse into spectacle

BY LOUISA ELDERTON IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 09 Oct 2025



If, like me, you were a teenager in the 1990s, you might have a soft spot for all things talk show: the padded armchairs illuminated by spotlights, the stage designed like an inviting but not-too-grand living room, the rows of chairs for a studio audience poised to ask provocative questions as presenters like Ricki Lake, Oprah Winfrey and Jerry Springer adjudicated. Such is the scene of Jordan Strafer's *DISSONANCE Set* (2025), the installation that opens her exhibition of the same name at Fluentum.



Opening and live film shoot of Jordan Strafer's *DISSONANCE*, 2025. Courtesy: the artist and Fluentum, Berlin; photograph: Anna Luisa Richter

The museum itself, a vast hall of black marble complete with columns and sweeping staircases, occupies part of a complex built between 1936 and 1938 as the district headquarters of the Nazi Luftwaffe. Here, during Berlin Art Week, Strafer filmed *DISSONANCE* (2025), which depicts a talk show hosted by a US soldier who leads the audience through a guided meditation. The film will be on view from late October and is situated in the same universe as her 'Loophole' series, following *LOOPHOLE* (2023) and *DECADENCE* (2024), projected one after the other onto a vast screen above the staircase.

The series tells the fictionalized story of a high-profile rape trial of the 1990s based on that of John F. Kennedy's nephew, William Kennedy Smith, who was acquitted in 1991 of raping a 29-year-old woman. *LOOPHOLE* is set in a courtroom, where, as the victim and witness are tenaciously examined, an affair unfolds between defence lawyer Ray (played by the same actor as the talk show host in *DISSONANCE*) and jury member Lisa. The pair exchange winks and smiles across the bench, are seen in titillating sex scenes involving dripping wax and slow dance as the accused serenades the court with a rendition of Frank Sinatra's 'Summer Wind' (1966). The victim's face is blurred out, though this glitches throughout to clearly reveal her identity. A relationship is established between visibility, anonymity and impunity – who is seen and unseen, protected and unprotected – within a system that values power over prudence, with loopholes for some but not all.



Jordan Strafer, *LOOPHOLE*, 2023, video still. Courtesy: the artist

LOOPHOLE and *DECADENCE* run about as long as an average television series episode (24 and 20 minutes respectively), but they are looped like a short feature film. Both have a cinematic quality that suggests a hybrid of psychosexual thematics from films like *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987), the soft-focus of 1970s pornography and the aesthetic gloss of the soap opera *Dallas* (1978).

Set at the Kennedy estate in Palm Beach, Florida, *DECADENCE* opens with a celebratory party following the not-guilty verdict. Smith's character makes a speech acknowledging his 'enormous debt, to the system and to God', claiming faith in both (naturally). A drag queen performs EMF's 1990 song 'Unbelievable'; later, a flashback reveals Smith chasing his victim through the same villa's darkened halls. While this may sound rather on the nose, it's not; Strafer's stylistic approach and framing allow her to walk the line between intimacy and spectacle, probing at the politics of visibility and asking how we navigate justice in a world in which abuse is reframed as salacious entertainment.



Jordan Strafer, *DECADENCE*, 2024, installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Heidi, Berlin and Fluentum, Berlin

Which brings us back to *DISSONANCE*, the talk show poised as its own kangaroo court, symbolized for now as an empty stage charged with latent potential. Just like the halls that house it, the work is seemingly neutralized yet never innocent. It is part of an active continuum – one that echoes in today's sociopolitical landscape, where far-right political parties are on the rise; Trumpian fascism makes a spectacle of the most heinous crimes, including his own acts of sexual abuse, and one of the men who raped Gisèle Pelicot is currently seeking impunity by claiming he believed her assault was a performance. Strafer's work speaks to cognitive dissonance at its most profound, reinforced by a voyeurism that strengthens the violence inherent to patriarchal power structures.

Jordan Strafer's '*DISSONANCE*' is on view at Fluentum, Berlin, until 13 December

Main image: Jordan Strafer, *DISSONANCE*, 2025, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Fluentum, Berlin; photograph: Stefan Korte