

TRANSFERRING THE EYE: EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY.

KEY-WORDS: AUTHORITY, SELF-PORTRAIT, WOMEN, COMMUNAL, THE UNFINISHABLE

In Helsinki Photomedia Conference 2024 by the main topic: *Contact of Models* I propose to analyse self-portrait photography as being performative in the exploration and expression of identity triggered by the 21st c. digital revolution; and the camera as skilled instrument in tracing collaborations; finally, the medium's social dimension by establishing individual interaction, communal inter-relation, emotional identification or empowerment.

Through my eyes as professor in visual arts (in Europe, Portugal, city of Porto) it became lucid how young female students are spontaneously interested on surveying themselves as women-to-be-considered. Sometimes, desired to be pictured and seen. Symptom of a country of non-inscribed women: higher in number in the classroom lower and lesser as artists, even as academics. I recall Virginia Woolf warn, beware sisters with the realm of the academic enterprise' values alien to women. As an *unfaithful daughter* (Stengers and Despret, 2014) **I feel compliant** for we keep growing in our careers without decisively evidence feminists' nuances, indulging mainstream artists in our classroom.

The commitment for self-representation as women is itself a condition. It is worth remembering the "double" and superb painting by Sofonisba Anguissola "Bernardino Campi painting Sofonisba Anguissola", circa 1559, as it is explicit, a painting of portrait made by a prominent male painter, also her tutor. The artist's gesture proves that art is timelessness, a painting from the Italian Cinquecento surpassed the Duchampian *avant-garde*, in an ultra-contemporary performativity. Self-representation's legacy means an expanded itinerancy: women artists became their own objects for more than five hundred years, such as carefree women amateur photographers became a lifelong spectator of themselves.

Scholar of cultural issues and visual theory, photographer and activist, Margaret Olin (2012) used the metaphor of touch in photography, of a tangible experience in the social dimension of the medium. Facing authentically empowered photography, the viewer is invited to look

through another person's eyes and identified as the photographer. What if the sitter has been transformed into a photographer or authority over his or her **own** representation? Olin uses examples of radical photographic empowerment projects in which communities are visualized through the use of cameras in the hands of the participants themselves.

Photographic series are widely known and are constructed through interviews, personal stories, photographs and a collage of documents reproduced by committed photographers. And, perhaps, lesser-known series that are built by transfer the photographer's gaze to the person who would be portrayed. One of those examples is Wendy Ewald's *political avant-garde practice* as a new model in documenting communities with unpredictable children — her students — holding film cameras in their own hands. Which holds the dilemma does the *child photographer acts as a medium or a tool for the teacher?* As the photographer asks herself, is she merging the subject and photographer to create *new picture-making* in her *artistic process?* (Ewald apud Olin, 2012) Ewald is co-editor of the book yet to be released, *Collaboration. A Potential History of Photography* (February 6th, Thames and Hudson USA) derived from an exhibition from 2018, in which history was re-wrote by projects of *collaborative laboratories*, some of them born in the 70's era of vanishing authorships. Yet my major question is what happens next? Is the self in the communal restored?

To my young female students and young amateur women photographers, I want to express how photographs act rather than what they depict. Such traces of collaboration will rise not from an appropriation (one taking the picture) but to acknowledge their own nature, so that part of the instability of the identity depicted will only rely to the viewer's eyes, even if looking through the portrayer's eyes. They will learn with my formal record of the past, that personal is still political, even if the personal has changed with the digital age. We'll be experimenting, *try out together, through a reciprocal catalysis*. (Stengers and Despret, 2014)

Interesting also to realize the scrutiny over non-artistic photography, emanating the fascination by the vernacular domain. Photography is a natural response to a phenomenon, as Mary W. Marien (2002) pointed, the pioneers neglected the camera operator, i.e. the genius of the medium exposed as "*auto-graphy*", as *nature's automatic writing*. In a most revealing interview to François Soulages (2017) [French art critic and aesthete, author of *Esthétique de la photographie*, 1999] — one could read: *photography is the incredible articulation between the irreversible and the unfinishable*. Irreversible because it holds a matrix (as negative or digital), unfinishable because the held can endlessly start something, as a choice. Already an image, in photography we don't face the *pure impression but with the*

exploration of that impression, such delivers a significant question: what to do from the first image?

Reality is unphotographable (Soulages, 1999) which means that reality isn't taken, it is made, at least photography potentially put at question reality itself. To Soulages an aesthetics of photography responds to a *médiologie*, in an analysis of the potentialities of the digital in circulation (2017): *An image that circulates, an image that we could call futuristic, the image of speed, the fluid image. That's the concept. Making mistakes in a fluid image. Today, I am no longer in contemplation. I'm in circulation. I become a fluid machine myself. That's what changes everything. It is this torrent of images that, in my opinion, changes everything. First, the person who took the photo and posts it changes. The artist also changes, who will be forced to think differently. Change the receiver. Change the world.... photography is not simply an image, but an image of the image. An image squared, an image to the second power.*

Photography is truly performative, I share the belief with Soulages (2017) that *participating in culture is integrating new and old elements in an articulated way, ordering them in one place. A place that is never definitive. The image of the image is, even today, the unfinishable.*

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BIO – SÓNIA NEVES

Born in South Africa in 1978. Lives and works in Porto. European Doctorate from the Faculty of Fine Arts of Pontevedra at the University of Vigo, benefiting from FCT scholarship (BD). Researcher at CITAR and professor in the School of Arts, both held by the Catholic University of Portugal. Attended an academic residency at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts (KUVA)

Spring 2013 Term. Graduated in Fine Arts/Painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto, and Erasmus program scholarship held at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna, Italy, in 2001. Exhibits since 1999 mainly in independent spaces managed or curated by artists.