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Student Number: 2119121

Programme of Study: Photography in the Arts

Module: ADAD5004 Research in Practice

Word Count: 2422

Tutor Name: Paul Duerinckx

Three Keywords: Fantasy, Exaggeration, Setup

Proposal for dissertation by Maja Lukaszuk

My proposal for dissertation is going to be based on my interest in fashion and staged photography - its aspects, characteristics, and processes. I will look at three photographers Jeff Wall, Tim Walker and David LaChapelle and discuss their ways of working, as well as other themes regarding them. My goal is to explore the ideas and principles behind works of those photographers and possibly use them for my practice in the future. The keywords are FANTASY, EXAGGERATION and SETUP. While my overall interest is set design and theatricality which is a community for all the works, I will be digging deeper to each of the keywords and artists, and their historical or present contexts.

My first keyword is FANTASY. It's all about the imaginative and impossible. I want to investigate the aspect of fantasy that is used in staged photography. Staged photography has its origins in the Victorian era, already by the time when the photography was invented in the nineteenth century. So-called *tableaux vivants*, from French «living pictures», were a form of entertainment for upper-class Victorians. Tableaux vivants would be staged, usually static, scenes created by actors or models, performing stories and narratives. There was a huge theatrical aspect to them: costumes and set were usually present (Somerville, 2017). Even though early photography was mainly focused on producing representational images, recreating tableaux with the new medium was natural. "The relationship between photography and performance dates back to the birth of photographic medium in the nineteenth century, and in particular the ability of the camera to capture the postures and expressions of actors and dancers already known for their work on the theatrical stage" (Baker, 2016, p. 64) Nadar was the pioneer in that area. In the late 1860s, the Pictorialists took over the qualities of storytelling images of tableaux vivants. For Pictorialists the emphasis was placed on beauty of subject matter and composition, rather than the documentation of reality. (Gorlinski, 2022) "Through their creations, the movement strove to elevate photography to the same level as painting..." (The Art Story¹, 2022). By doing so, the photographic movement started a discussion about categorizing photography as art and its artistic value in general. Pictorialism was closely linked to prevailing artistic movements, as the photographers took inspiration from popular art, adopting its styles and ideas to demonstrate parity

between it and photography (The Art Story¹, 2022). That's therefore an early presence of pastiche, a postmodern strategy for image making. As contemporary as the trend of recreating, in around 1980 came back the trend for story creation and staged photography became popular again.



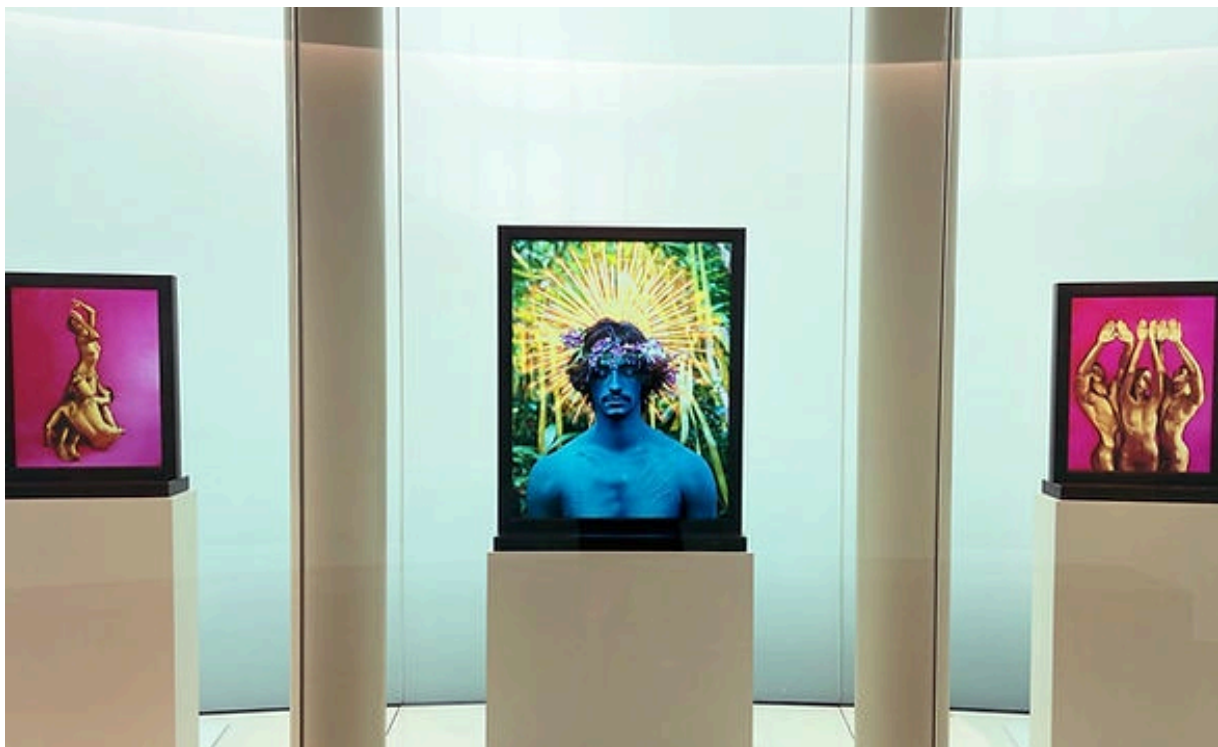
Cloud 9, Tim Walker for Vogue, from the book *Wonderful Things*, 2019

Fantasy was present in Pictorialist's works, but tableaux vivants is what I mean exactly with my keyword: the bringing the mythical scenes and painted legends to life, set design, costumes, and characterization. The artist who represents my keyword is Tim Walker. He is a photographer, specializing in fashion photography whose works take you to the magical world of imagination. As tableaux vivants, Walker's photographs take a team of creatives to perform the shared vision and get the right image. In the book *Wonderful Things* Tim together with set designers and a curator of Victoria and Albert Museum talk about the processes and ideas behind his works. He tells about how he gets inspired by the object of the V&A collection: "It's those objects when we went through the V&A, that made my heart swell. It's an

explosion of love for something that's overwhelming that you want to try to make a photograph of it somehow" (Brown, 2019, p. 12) The "Cloud 9" photoshoot, that Walker created for British *Vogue*, was inspired by paintings and ivory carvings of animals from India. (Brown, 2019, p. 68) The images he made are the core of what fantasy is about, you see green elephants and pink tigers above models "dancing" in the fields full of flowers. The weirdness and the vibrant colors are captivating and makes you wonder what else could be added to the picture. Walker says that photography is a highly emotional thing for him (Brown, 2019, p. 70). I think this is visible in his works: they convey the thoughtfulness and essence of the thinking process of the artist creating the picture.

The fantasy that is present in Walker's photographs is definitely a collaborative creation. The photographs are staged; however, I think Walker takes it a step further, he creates magical fantasy worlds, with help of others. As tableaux vivants, he tells a story with his photographs. The fantasy factor is always present, as he gets inspired by other works of art. The point of staged photography is to tell a story, I believe, and fantasy is something to be conveyed by images or stories.

My next keyword is EXAGGERATION. The oxford definition of this word is "the fact of making something seem larger, more important, better, or worse than it



Picture of Sergei Polunin at the exhibition of David LaChapelle in MUDEC, Milan, Italy, 2022

really is" (Cambridge Dictionary¹, 2022). For me exaggeration is a hyperbola, something bigger than it is, something so much more than reality. The artist representing this keyword is David LaChapelle, whose photography can be easily described as an exaggeration; it's full of bold juxtapositions and glam. LaChapelle is a photographer, same as Walker, mostly famous for his fashion or commercial photography. Nevertheless, there are some major differences between those two: LaChapelle's works are definitely more glamorous and sexual, with a focus to shock, while Walker's pictures are more flamboyant (Mendo, 2019). However, LaChapelle says himself that he doesn't make his art to shock others (anymore). As he says, spirituality and enlightenment drive him and his ideas (Matthews, 2017). And his works often have spiritual motifs, and he plays with them: my main focus is the weirdness and exaggeration of those motifs.

In his book *Good News*, there is a photograph of a ballet dancer Sergei Polunin. He has a flower crown and a golden halo above his head, which resembles the ones from religious iconography. The religious aspect is conveyed beside a bright blue colored model and tropical plants in the background. I believe the blue color might symbolize spirituality or inspiration, as well as plants can be a sign of peace with nature. However, whatever the idea was, the picture stands out and its strong colors becomes an overstatement - something to be fascinated about. *This is My Home* from 1997, is another example how LaChapelle's photos are "extra". The photo is flashy and pop and give off a bit of Camp's sensibility. As Susan Sontag described it in her book *Notes on Camp*, «the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural; of artifice and exaggeration.» (Sontag, 1964, s. 1). In this sense LaChapelle's style could be called Camp. «Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of

Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization. »
(Sontag, 1964, s. 2)

When most of the LaChapelle's works can be considered aesthetically pleasing, sometimes it seems like some decisions that has been made are not for aesthetic purposes but to achieve the factor to make the work "extra". A big part of exaggerations in photography has been pushed on to fashion photography already when the earliest fashion images were being published. Especially after the Pictorialists would become underdogs and straight photography would take over. Edward Steichen, who was an initiating power for American art photography, was both a Pictorialist and Straight photography practitioner; as well one of the



This is My House, David LaChapelle for Vogue, 1997

pioneers of fashion photography (The Art Story², 2022). Steichen said: "The making of beautiful objects and things of ornaments, and even of utility, have practically been banished from the realm of art to the more active and more lucrative scope of commerce." (Brandow, 2008, p. 19) Commerce is an unattachable part of fashion photography. It's a big industry with big money. However, both Walker and

LaChapelle might disagree with Steichen's statement: "I wanted to work with business, like an engineer" (Brandow, 2008, p. 9). For many artists editorial or commercial work is a way of making money to be able to work on their personal works. For LaChapelle that was probably that, and the fact that the commerce would allow his artistic spirit to be set free. In the interview for GUP magazine, he reflects over materialism and higher purposes of his works "I've been making pictures for other reasons than just to create more merchandise in the world" (Matthews, 2017).

Exaggeration is apparently a better quality for fashion however I believe that contemporary art can be as bold and "extra" as LaChapelle's works. "*Many fashion photographers have their individual style and doing a shoot either editorial or for personal purposes are challenging traditional definitions and hierarchies*" (Bright, 2005, p. 135)

My last keyword is SETUP, which means "an arrangement of things that allows something to happen, or the process that prepares this arrangement" (Cambridge Dictionary², 2022). In my understanding is doing something before the job can be done or putting something in place. I will be mostly writing having in mind the latter. Setup is practically always present when a major photo shoot is happening. However, in this case I want to write about Jeff Wall's setups, which are not so obvious. Wall's art revolves around ideas of realism and pictorialism (jeff wall 7). His photographs usually show scenes and events of everyday life - he creates poetic reconstructions of the world. The staged photographs he makes have qualities of snapshots; in an interview for Louisiana Channel, Wall says himself that his photographs are contemplations about that characteristic, which, he states, makes his photos near documentary (Wagner, 2015).



In Front of a Night Club, Jeff Wall, 2006

Nevertheless, it is difficult to declare that Wall's photography could be called documentary whilst it often contains a set-up aspect to it. Perhaps the best example of that is his image *In Front of a Night Club* from 2006. On the picture we can see a crowded street in front of a night club. The photo is fully staged: there are anonymous actors and a copy of a real club (that would be too difficult to photograph during a busy evening). Wall called it "artifice made necessary by circumstances not necessary a value in itself" (Wagner, 2015). He adds that the fact that it's set up is interesting but not important. Citing cinematographic principles, he claims that "a really accurate replica of a place itself has a documentary quality" (Wagner, 2015). I believe that the camera promises to be a neutral recorder of reality, however if that reality is copied or manipulated, can it still be considered reality? Wall agrees that notion of the document or truth is complex in photography (Wagner, 2015). However, how can photos that has been manipulated and staged classified as document? Wall's photography questions credibility of the camera (performing). The set-up and manipulation could let him be free from the reality and open new doors for expression. Calling his photography "near documentary" on the other hand doesn't seem wrong, when considering his photos as photography of performance.

Overpass is an image where four people are walking on the sidewalk by the highway, in a cloudy weather. Four performances would walk back and forth to let Wall create best composition. When describing this photograph, Wall would argue that since sky was changing, cars were passing by, and people were walking - they were performing: the final photo resembles candid photo as an outcome of decisions (Wagner, 2015). As someone interested in staged photography, I don't see the need



Overpass, Jeff Wall, 2001

to call those photos documentary. However, I understand where Wall's views are coming from. As artist interested in cinema, it is probably just natural for him that things happening in front of the camera are not necessarily fantastic tableaux, but just life scenes that he wants to document that will not be as spontaneous as a snapshot yet having quality of one. "By depicting incidents that he witnesses but does not attempt to photograph in the moment, he opens up formal and dramatic possibilities for pictures that, he has said, "contemplate the effects and meanings of documentary photographs" (Gagosian, 2022).

Wall makes his setups subtle. The way he stages his photograph makes it look like real world yet there is lots of manipulation in the process. What I like about his art is that he is on the other side of the spectrum of staged photography than Walker and LaChapelle. The documentary aspect is also interesting and a good starter for a further discussion.

My keywords fantasy, exaggeration and set-up has been accompanied by “stage photography”, “fashion photography” “collaboration” and few more throughout my text. I believe that the area I’m interested in came across well, however I see that many topics within that still become unclear and there are question unanswered. What I have learn the most from writing this text is how the artist making art I’m interested in are thinking and what are their processes.

Fantasies of Tim Walker resemble the tableaux vivants from Victorian era, especially thinking about how fashion takes inspiration from that period of time. Many of his works looks more like art-narratives than straight fashion photography. Same could be said about LaChapelle, however as mentioned, his art is more: in all aspects of that world - it’s exaggerated. It’s over the top fashion and commercial photography, however, I really enjoy how his way of being flashy works with his spiritual backgrounds. I think the question that comes to mind after writing about both Walker and LaChapelle is that where is the line between art and fashion photography. Especially thinking about Jeff Wall’s art: he does staged photography, while calling it “near documentary”. Of course, the style and importance of Wall’s work has probably been bigger than Walker’s or LaChapelle*s... But why? Is it the commercial aspect that makes fashion photography looked down on? It could be the colors and exaggeration. This is something I would love to dig more into. In the future I wish to get more sources and books so that my research will be better. Summing up, next year I want to focus on areas: fashion photography, staged photography, contemporary art, creating narratives and differences between art and fashion.

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