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How has the change of social and cultural codes, over the centuries, influenced the gender representations in Classical and Contemporary Art?

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Giuseppe Bonito, *Il Femminiello* 1740-60 Portland Art Museum

Therese Frare, David Kirby 1990 United Colors of Benetton Campaign

Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Last Supper* 1495–1498 Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie

Luke Gilford, *National Anthem America's Queer Rodero* Book by Matthew Riemer, 2020

Luke Gilford, *National Anthem America's Queer Rodero* Book by Matthew Riemer, 2020

Kristine Potter, *Manifest* 2012-2015

Arthur Tress (*Male of the Species*, 1999)

Robert Mapplethorpe, *Patrice* (1977) National Galleries Scotland

Robert Mapplethorpe *Joe*, (1978) National Galleries Scotland

Robert Mapplethorpe *Philip* (1979) National Galleries Scotland

Christina Quarles "*I Wake With Yew in Mourning*" 2017

Sunil Gupta *Exiles* (1986-87)

Sunil Gupta *Memorials* (1995)

Barat Ali Batoor *The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan*

Loulou d'Aki, *Bacha Posh* 2017 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Rocco Morabito, *The Kiss of Life*; Pulitzer Prize 1968

Dafydd Williams, *Malum* 2020 Glynn Vivian Gallery

For my dissertation proposal, I will explore a branch of my subject of interest related to the topic Identities ,social phenomena and movements and how those are incorporated into the scheme of social and cultural codes and the impact of them in the art context. An extended topic discussion that needs to be deconstructed to explain in an exhaustive way the dynamics unleashed and the historical course of roles of socialisation.

My aim is to start analysing the evolution of the gender classification in the art, my focus is to dwell on various points like visual stereotypes, controversies, and activism using 3 keywords through which I will try to “examine” the topic identities.

Gender expression ,the irrelevance of being labelled and the cliché represented in the art , the cultural globalization discovering the level of acceptance in geographical terms and the celebration of “diversity” identifying the various stages conquered. My initial figure of reference the Femminiello, would be found in Southern Italian culture. It represents a sort of third gender that is present socially and culturally in Naples. There are distinct considerations around this character; the Femminiello as a symbol of transgression, associated with prostitution practiced clandestinely in the lower social class areas and for the other side an integral part of the folkloristic Parthenopean scene that reflect the vibrance of a land rich of worship costumes and traditions. Described as “a very important character of Naples viscerally attached to its origin halfway between pagan spirituality and popular wisdom” (F.D’Alfonso,2018). But how important has been the evolution of this figure in the art? What value has been attributed to this benign entity? Has it been

symbolized in its neutrality and innocuously, responsive to the feminine attitudes and encapsulated in a well-accepted male frame? “The Femminiello” (G.Bonito,1740-60), the first depictions of this figure date back to the eighteenth century when the traditional social construction was apparently established and the declared gender binarism surely possible but not common. In the representation is highlighted the nature of the role “Bold, colourful and strangely comic” (Nico Lang, 2016) an acquired feminine gesture in the front character ,symbol of a liberty of “coming out” breaking the cultural norm that we assuming to rarely belong to those epoque but that prove, as Lang affirms, that “Gender nonconformity is far from a modern invention” (Nico Lang, 2016)



However, it is difficult to think how instead the sexual orientation has been stigmatized up to the recent years, a striking example was the powerful image of Therese Frare, divulgated worldwide by the Benetton campaign of Oliviero

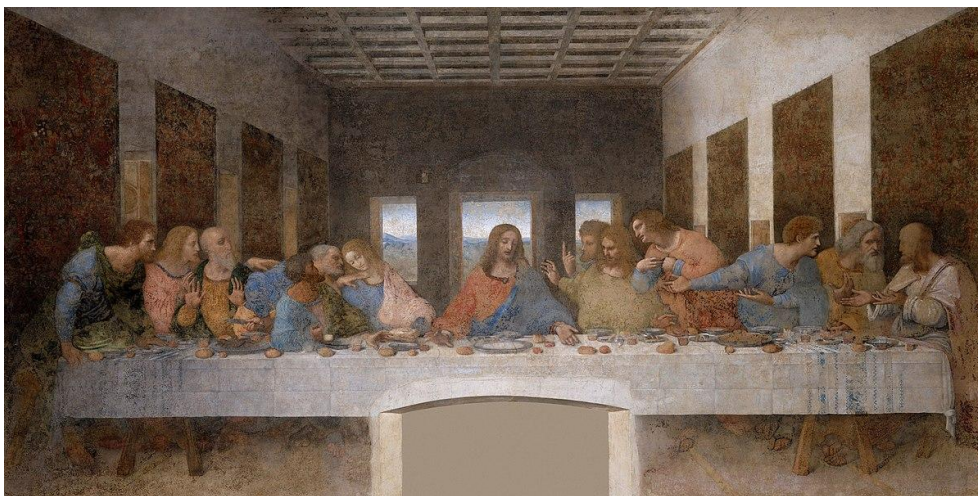
Toscani in the early 90s when the stereotype of the gay-aids binomial was strongly widespread, GRID (Gay-related immune deficiency) acronym coined by the American press. The image has in some way reinforced the false concept in certain minds, on the other hand, it gave a true face to the drama of AIDS sensitising the public opinion. The last moment of David Kirby hasn't been only object of controversies regarding the disease of the century and the stereotype towards gays as main cause of AIDS spread, even the Vatican, morally out of place, has pronounced its dissent, reviewing in this act of pain of a father consumed by the grieving the explicit and offensive invocation to the Pity (Michelangelo, 1498-1499) "Deliberately" associate a moribund homosexual to a religious iconography has been considered implausible and obscene.



It is confirmed that has not been the unique reaction in which the Opus Dei has manifested all its wrath regarding the analysis of artworks, marking the boundaries between, according to their point of view, sacred and blasphemous.

The Last Supper is the masterpiece that undoubtedly raised the most controversies with the mystery of gender identity, John the apostle's role in fact stirred and attracted even the attention and critiques of atheists and agnostics. The most accredited seems to be the version of Mary Magdalene. Inspecting the figure at first glance is inevitable to notice the resemblance with a woman.

The shape and lines of a slightly Junoesque body that recall the curves of maternity, the difference with others' angular facial features, a not visually voluminous breast partially hidden by a stole. But some wonder how we could ever justify the absence of the disciples John? "On the other hand, Magdalene is considered by the apocryphal Gospel of Philip to be the "disciple whom Jesus loved "(Jn 13,23; 19,26; 20,1-10; 21,7; 21,20). Hence the extreme hypothesis, which in reality St. John is Magdalene in disguise. An exchange of identity wanted by the first commonly male-dominated Catholic community, implemented to establish male supremacy in the Church. "(Emilio Acunzo,2018)



“Is it absurd to think that Leonardo, by deeply hating the church, may have been

tempted to desecrate it? What maximum desecrating element to be able to insert in his works, if not the homosexuality represented by Salai (Leonardo's assistant) which both for the aforementioned physical characteristics and for the strange relationships with Leonardo represents in the eyes of the same a homosexual icon"(E.Acunzo,2018) "First, Michelangelo (like DaVinci) did not seem to understand female anatomy very well...You can see that in the extreme musculature of the women portrayed in the Sistine Chapel frescoes." (R. Eliason,2017) Eliason affirmed instead ,almost discrediting Leonardo's artistic talent and his faculty of gender distinction but without ever going to affect and question his heterosexual nature. This not because necessarily we need to etiquette people but as Emilio Acunzo observed and clarified "Leonardo's alleged homosexuality is not intended to engage in sexual discrimination or to tell erotic scandals but only as an element from which the interpretation derives".(E.Acunzo,2018) But what if the church , over the centuries, tried to conceal a "compromising" side of the truth?

So as blasphemous as it may seem, if we vigorously discuss, fuelling doubts and assumptions, about the fact that Jesus had a darker skin tonality rather than a Caucasian appearance, married or celibate, indulgent or demanding in his preaching, Son of God or a prophet? tolerant with the adultery and polygamy or "The man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife and the two will be one flesh "(Genesis 2:24) ? based on the set of all these disambiguation could my questions be legitimized even if few could result unorthodox? Could it be a valid theory that a homosexual, androgynous ,femminiello could have been a member of

Jesus' Apostles and be accepted without distinctions?

How more diffused could have gender equality been compared to modern society?

He loved Magdalen or John? "Heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual: Jesus could have been any of these. The intimate relationship with the beloved disciple points in that direction. To suggest otherwise is to buy into a kind of puritanism that has long tainted the churches"(P.Oestreicher,2012) Art has brought to light the potential existence of a "parallel" social code, where probably no one was anchored by cultural conventions, it's enough to think the sapphic love narrated by Sappho of Lesbos and her reputation back in years before Christ, conventions made up of prejudices and intolerance and how the erroneously the concept to collocate the gender "deviance" in a predeterminate temporal frame could belong instead to a more contemporary practice. Moving closer to our era, a time of sexual liberation in the 1960s, the Stonewall riots (1969) were an attempt to declare and affirm individual sexual identity and fight for rights to express this. At the same time, more broadly in many societies, attempts to extend this liberalism failed to gain traction. Repression of homosexuality, in terms of both individual expression and public acceptance, despite the removal of legal constraints, remained the norm. Brokeback Mountain was a film, became a symbol in the Queer Cinema that represented the dynamics of those remote places in the middle 60s and depicted the aversion towards the diversity of sentiments. The critic Ebert affirmed "Brokeback Mountain has been described as "a gay cowboy movie," which is a cruel simplification. Their tragedy is universal. It could be about two women, or lovers from different religious or ethnic

groups any "forbidden" love." (R.Ebert,2005) An intriguing reality of cowboys, that in the mass culture going to embody masculinity and testosterone. The photographer Luke Gilford transferred, through his project "America's Queer Rodeo" (L.Guilford,2016), a new vision demonstrating that the male vigour is not necessarily a heterosexual characteristic, deconstructing a cultural belief in a sort of rodeos' renaissance.





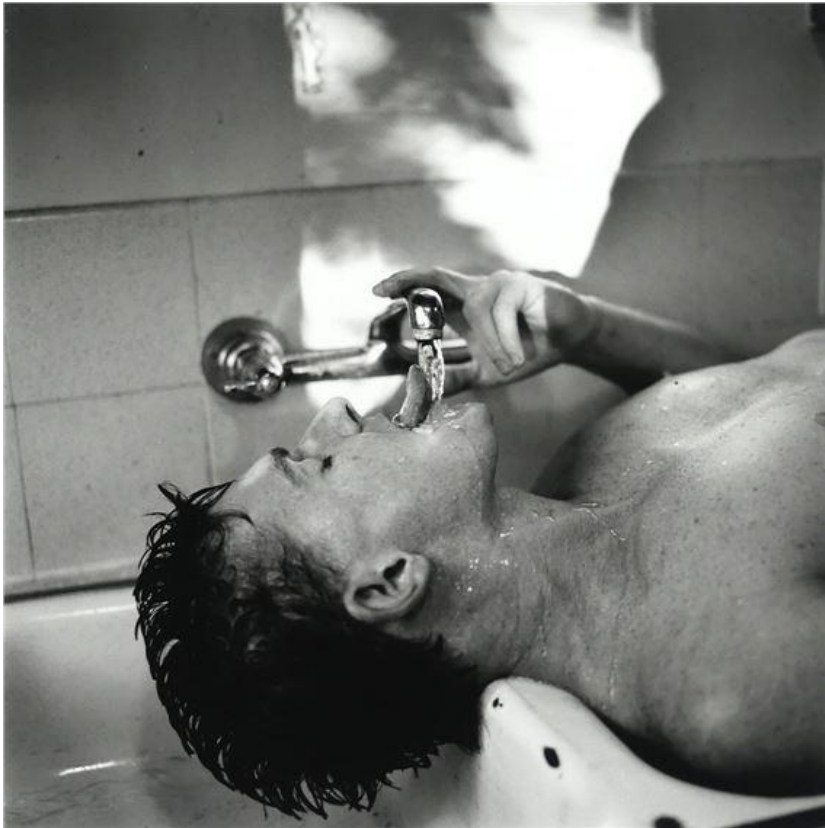
The images of Kristine Potter “looking with a new lens, a new gaze,” (S.Clark,2018) seems to look in the same direction but in a variant form, proposing an unstandardized virility, dispelling the myth of homo proudness where dismantles this distorted cultural conviction engaging with fact that the figure of cowboys do not always reflex the canon of macho icon and is not essential to stumble within the classification parameters. “However, their masculinity doesn't just come from a stoic strength like the cowboy archetype. Potter set out to show that masculinity exists on a spectrum.” (S. Clark,2018)



A physicality that has been also explored by Arthur Tress

(Male of the Species, 1999) in attempt to materialize the deepest fantasies, he fell, for the most, in the cliché of homosexuality as the result of the addition of nudity/men.

Misleading and allusive content of sculpted bodies in promiscuous acts with erotic toys proclaiming a status of sex binge.



However even though some representations could be deemed “exaggerated,” the right of expression is unquestionable because going to constitute a source of pride and a message to communicate. `Many of the images are seen as sexually explicit – or more precisely, homosexually explicit. I make my pictures homosexual on purpose. Black men from the Third World have not previously revealed either to their own peoples or to the West a certain shocking fact: they can desire each other.” (Rotimi Fani-Kayode,2018) Robert Mapplethorpe for instance was an “habitué” in homoeroticism photography, his shots were explicitly provocative and represented a how the homosexual community was recognized on the basis of dressing code and BDSM practices, in the times when the gay community revolutionised the conformist etiquette with a specific purpose: “Breaking down the boundaries...Wearing our pride” (K.Jr Roberts,2020)

Patrice (1977) Joe,(1978), Philip (1979) even considered “controversial” images had the capacity to narrate a cross-section of a West society. ” His works, therefore, hold a significant place in the history of artistic struggle to depict the world as it is, with honesty and truth....By titling the works with the name Mapplethorpe gave his subject an identity and individuality, even while showing them as faceless and anonymous.” (National Galleries Scotland,2018)





It is inevitable not to notice how artists about gender identity approach with a different personal taste, ethical principles, ambition.

Other notorious photographers for instance ,with a “superior tact” ,got closer to the condition of “discomfort” rather than to document the sexual activity. Profound themes that leave behind stereotypes of forbidden which often the homosexuals are associated with. “The Danish girl” (T.Hooper,2015) movie is an emblem of poignant force because explored, in psychological terms, how the drama of the body entrapment is perceived and experienced also by those who live around a subject in a state of transition. The power and function of art is not to neglect any aspects, narrate in their complexity and completeness, using also the trauma aimed at the therapeutic purpose. “I Wake With Yew in Mourning” of Christina Quarles, has the same emotional traits.An abstraction of a distorted body in bright pastel tones as a fusion of fragility and strength “In her wall-sized, surreal paintings, Quarles channels

the volatile cocktail of power and vulnerability that is being a queer woman of colour. Her work is deeply political and focuses on identity and all its often-murky boundaries”(Art Girls Jungle,2020) Quarles’ paintings depict corporal mutilations, interrupted amorous acts, a body contortionism that seems to represent the fury of an emotional destabilization.



But how much the will of an artist to face up themes like sexuality could be altered by cultural difference? Sunil Gupta had always one constant question in his mind.

“What does it mean to be a gay Indian man? (M.Rosen,2021)

Exiles (1986-87)Memorials (1995) Pre-Raphaelites (2008) flows

into the personal experience., “The portraiture was an excuse to get to something else” (Sunil Gupta,2020) but also a real hymn to the right to equality. An artist who was able to ascertain the social behaviour differences between West and East and moreover experiencing with another scourge of discrimination’s category

“The impact of white supremacy extended far and wide.” (Miss Rosen,2021)

The enculturation experience, determined his fervent involvement in battle against racial/gender discrimination. More than an exponent of the Black and Queer Art, Gupta turned out to be an activist witness. I am wondering how much photographers could feel limited in “inhospitable” environments.



Geographically in a space where you are dealing with radical culture beliefs, penal code, dictatorship does it require more effort, more time, more attention?

“Barat Ali Batoor spent months working to gain access to the hidden, notorious underworld of bacha bazi”...I was about to give up until a dancer finally invited me to a party for handicapped mujahidin fighters”. (R. Murray,2012) Batoor and Loulou d’Aki documented the “inverse” violation of sexuality in Afghanistan, a country where the right to affirm own individuality is denied and homosexuality is punished but absurdly the Bacha Bazi practice is promoted by the élite and the Bacha Posh, the forced assignment of male gender to girls in absence of a son permitted

“This tradition allows the family to avoid the social stigma associated with not having any male children”(N. Storchlic,2018) A dual identity of girls imposed to dress and act like boys in unripe age, "benefit" a male status, to then back to the original gender once approaching pubescence.Loulou d’Aki photographed this sort of “sexual fluidity” which does not vary according to personal needs but only in relation to the social norms scale and is not recognized in the constellation of gender definitions drawn up since now.





But could these 2 identities have an “affinity” with Judith Butler’s ideology? Does this theory regard exclusively the voluntary acts or is it also included the acceptance of an assigned gender? She conceptualise about the fact that “Gender, rather than being an essential quality following from biological sex, or an inherent identity, is an act which grows out of, reinforces, and is reinforced by, societal norms and creates the illusion of binary sex” (T.Morgenroth,2018) so if sexual orientation is a process that develops on the basis of society influences “repeatedly performed, based on, and reinforced by, societal norms”(T. Morgenroth,201) concept also embraced by John Money “a promoter of the idea that gender roles were encoded by socialization.”(G. Corbellini,2020) what regulates the higher inclination of a human being in comparison with the lower predisposition of another person that

living in the same society? The theory is questionable inasmuch there is in contrast with Jacques Balthazar's thought that states the exact opposite.

"Sexual orientation is programmed in the brain before birth by a set of prenatal, genetic and epigenetic conditions, none of which is chosen by the fetus"

(G.Corbellini,2020). In light of the disparate studies, with the

benefit of the doubt regard both hypotheses, my attention turns away from the

specific statements and focusing on evaluation of the collective morality of the

culture to which I belong, by referring to all the set of social code, norms and

dogmas and being aware that those could in same way influence and change our perception affecting the sense of judgments.

Would for example "The kiss of life" (R. Morabito,1967) have had the same

"glory" if there were portrayed opposite sex subjects? "When I saw these two guys kissing, it made me think back to my morals of not caring what others thought of you;

From issues about gay rights, it made me think how this picture could be used in

their defence (M.Dorf,2011) Despite the image it may have been little inherent into

dynamics linked to homosexuality, has awakened attention to the importance of

being human by throwing for a moment the gender "concern" into oblivion.

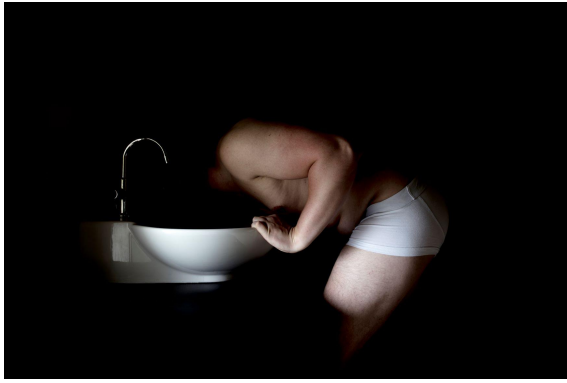


The world of art proposed multiple forms of discussion focusing often on the concept of diversity, but I believe that remarking on the fact of representing a different “category”, artists will be far to demonstrate in real terms what we socially obtained, just because we should historically and culturally be at an advanced stage. I suppose that the real conquest of modern society must be celebrating the normalcy of homosexuality without feeling the need for approval by the audience. Malum (D. Williams,2020) is an exhibition presented by Dafydd Williams at Glynn Vivian Gallery, the images are in a delicate Caravaggio Esque Chiaroscuro evoking the pure intimacy of male-male domestic relationship, expressing what really takes place behind and far from the frivolous scenario as an antechamber of the prejudices. The title is sought in the etymology of the Latin word Malum which means prohibited,evil, apple “ refers to the historically discriminatory attitude towards sexual difference and the biblical idea of forbidden fruit.”(Glynn Vivian Gallery,2020) The installation is suspended between Mythology, astral and carnality, the merge of divine and earthly. Malum aimed to establish that homosexuality is not a modern

phenomenon, reconfirming the thought of Nico Lang previously mentioned, “I was making an argument that gay are part of tradition and religion” (D.Williams,2020)

Images that in a contemporary key recall the musculature of Michelangelo’s frescoes as celebration of male body, the flesh represented in its naturalness and far from the revised and stereotyped representation of spectacle of “gay” libido. A “new” frontier love that in front of my “heterosexual eyes” turns out to be much pure, real emanating a more “sacred” essence rather than profane.





The world of art has imprinted in the time the social changes, documenting the progress and regress of humanity but it has been able to contemplate, denounce, contest absolutely everything without omitting anything?

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