

ADA DI PALMA:1903003

BA:DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY & VISUAL ACTIVISM

MODULE: RESEARCH IN CONTEXT (ADAD5003)

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"It is useless and tedious to represent what exists, because nothing that exists satisfy me....I prefer the monsters of my fantasy to what is positively trivial" Baudelaire, Salon Review (1859)

Is Baudelaire's position defensible in light of the case lens-based art forms make to "represent what exists"? Or, from a contemporary perspective, does the "monster of fantasy" still allow artists to engage with "what exists" creatively?

Often a thought has more ramifications, but specifically what Baudelaire intended? Detach from reality in order not to fall into the vortex of vulgarity, a need to dissociate from it, but the monsters mentioned by Baudelaire are purely imaginary or are they a reflection of the reality? "Baudelaire inaugurates a new era of literature, and art in general, without a halo, aware of its degradation in an era dominated by the "god of the useful", a desecrated and desecrating literature, still capable of addressing the muses, yes, but sick and venal, still capable of producing flowers, yes, but evil" (S.Germini,2020)

I would say a sort of refuge which generates a process of deconstruction in order to crumble and reform the reality in its own image and resemblance," "Could-be-otherwise" of things, create a new world" (Baudelaire,1859 p.223-224, 227) the creation of something not very defined which also sometimes gives to the audience the space for a subjective interpretation. But where does the need of an artist to give a chaotic and enigmatic aspect to his artwork come from? Could the desire to oppose a sick society be inspirational?

At the time of the Stalinist censorship Russian artists used to encode their manuscripts, a

sort of veiled protest against the regime, Michael Bulgakov is the explicit example with "The Master and Margaret"(1967) "These carnival devils are less monstrous than their victims, in fact, the punishments to be inflicted on Muscovites come from the hell of Soviet realism, in a sort of Dantesque counterpoint" . (Francesco M. Cataluccio,2016)

In more recent times Marcello Faletra Lecture of Phenomenology of the image and decoration referring to the function of monsters in the art said " In short, the monster is a conceptual and social threshold, a figure around which knowledge and powers take shape....the monster produces a shock, but also cynical voyeurism, which from the end of the 19th century will transform "amorphous" creatures into spectacle occasions" (M. Felletra,2019)

The imagination materializes in vast representations and definitions. "The imagination, the supreme delight of the immortal and the immature, should be kept in check. To enjoy life, we shouldn't enjoy it too much" (V. Nabokov, 1951). An "exuberant" Flaubert declared "Create a harem in your head and crowd it with dreams and fantasies... indulge in the corrupt fascination of the multitude because the mind is the only place in our body

Where abundance is not insane....the only corner where murder is not punished, incest is not judged, the only alcove in which to welcome the friend's woman without betraying him ... an advantage of our mind that is inside it abolished good taste " (Flaubert,1853)

But is it right to trespass the boundaries of immorality? Are the artists conditioned and influenced by the external reality or sometimes is just fruit of an individual artistic path? Are the practitioners limited to create exclusively what exists in an explicit and literal way or availing of use of allegories and symbols reinforce the concept?

The imagination has certainly inspired the birth of several cultural movements similar and in opposition to each other.

In my opinion, art like a prisma offers multiple perspective angles; it regards the introspection, but an artist also as an observer of the society and not only of himself, should have the faculty to produce based on other realities far from him or if feels the necessity concretise what of purely imaginative he visualized. Art is the manifestation of lots of factors and for instance, could be inspired by love and romanticism without having ever met them. However, different practitioners can give voice to the same subject of interest and represent it in a totally different narrative, where the form results to be different but not the substance and purpose.

I believe that the “problem” is not only regarding the relationship between practitioner and his work but also how to involve the audience, stimulating the other imagination, generating criticism, igniting a discussion, the last step in order to finalise an artistic work cycle. If only it weren't that in today's demanding contemporary art the criticism sometimes has an inclination to give often a meaning and interpretation to a no literal piece, where to every work there is a corresponding analysis, which often affects the work itself, and above all making it a work of imagination that leaves a tiny space to the imagination. The finalization has the purpose, with a nauseating verve, of setting the mechanism of giving the economical value to the “object” among other objects. Art that becomes marketing. Art that must be consumed like Andy Warhol thought it was right. With the advent of the capitalist era and productivism, Pop art was the pioneer that paid attention to the phenomenon of the consumerism and Andy Warhol has been the major exponents of the movement giving value to simple objects “advertising” them and making those iconic symbols in American mass culture. Theory embraced also by Jeff Koons “I love the gallery, the arena of representation. It's a commercial world and morality is based generally around economics” (Jeff Koons, 1986)

A kind of “antagonists” of Baudelaire who instead “Rejected the arid bourgeois logic of productivity and despised money”.(S.Germini,2014).

Leaving out for a moment the consumerist aspect and focusing on emotional power I

realised that a strong point in common among many artistic works, especially into

photography, even the difference in style and aesthetic from each other, is the dramaticity

in all its veracity, expressed in the most varied forms, represented in raw or more delicate

ways, in which regularly transpires all the pain essence that often captures the attention.

For us spectators it is more probable to reflect in a pain rather than in happiness a pain we can associate and confront with.

An example is the Photographer Chris Killip in his “In Flagante two” (1975) project tells the story of an industrial, social and economic decline and in his street photography he

immortalizes the faces where the malaise of those times emerges in such a palpable way, but

in his “True Love Wall”(1975) he leaves time to the imagination and to grasp that desperation

in a completely individual way, allowing to create one's own mask of pain based on what we

can perceive and “recognize” a face with which we can idealize through an unknown

character to whom we give arbitrarily an identity. Personally, I believe that this is precisely

what brings us closer to one artist than to another, the sense of sharing, what even in small

particles it can become a familiar feeling.

“This is my diary, this is my distilled essence, and I'm hopeful that with your experience

tonight with the pictures you see, that they will become part of your diary, and your essence,

too.” (R. Ballen,2013)

In the field of photojournalism, a photographer has not only the commitment of

documenting a state or to entertain the public, but must practice an art form that is forward-looking, trying to avoid to be retrospective and nostalgic with the past, in certain context, the vehicle through which we could embrace and elaborate solutions. Alfredo Gaar at the question "What impact would you like your work to have?" He answered "I hope to offer a little hope in a time of despair. But it is difficult. I remain a Gramscian: I am a pessimist with my intellect, but an optimist with my will."(Alfredo Gaar,2018)

The eyes of Gutete Emerita (A.Gaar,1996) and "Guernica" (P.Picasso,1937) with a sort of "spectacle of pain" are the clear example of acts of denunciations and protests and this factors have determined the success of these artworks.

"Painting is an instrument of offensive and defensive warfare against the enemy"

(P. Picasso,1945) Picasso affirmed. In my view, I appreciate the practice of rage and dare rather than minimize in an attempt to arouse a reaction strong enough to make it an ideology to fight for. Therefore "The success of a museum is not judged by the number of visitors who flock to it, but by the number of visitors who have been taught something...if it does not possess these characteristics it is only a sort of "cultural slaughterhouse"

(G. Henri Rivière,1976).

In the 20th century, Documentary Photography started to appear in more multiple forms, establishing the difference between Photojournalism and Visual Activism. The latter seems to represent a significant approach to the fine art, that allows the exploration of the mind in terms of imagination and subconscious "So much of today's photography doesn't 'grab us' or mean anything to our personal lives. ...It fails to touch upon the hidden life of the imagination which is hungry for stimulation. The documentary photographer supplies us with facts or drowns us in humanity, while the pictorialists please us with mere aesthetically correct composition." (A. Tress,1970) and I would say that it allows an artist to

explore more widely, with the association of creative elements and explain, in a more exhaustive way, disparate personal opinions in a unique work.

Photographers like Julia Fullerton Batten, Arthur Tress have both adopted a versatile way of experimentation and communication, proposing often orchestrated scenarios with cinematic reflexes and a combination of surrealism and reality, but without losing the documentarist spirit to convey a message through their images. For instance "Teenage Stories"(2005), "Feral Children"(2015) "The Act" (2016) are 3 projects belonging to Julia Fullerton Batten, presented in exhibition around the world, where she investigates social issues and topics like turbulent familiar relationships, the transition of adolescent into womanhood, prostitution.

Is noticeable how she is passionately focused on the women theme, how the feminine figure is predominant telling about their feeling, state of destabilization in which they pour into the growth process, the role in a misogyny society, exploitation of the sex industry.

The floating women of her project "In between"(2009/2010) represents an extension of the project "Teenage Stories"(2005) the advanced stage of puberty approaching closer to the maturity of adulthood transporting with them all the difficulties of the growth process. Women who fall, who are invested and throw emotionality in a world that pushes them back a bit, amplifying the sense of inadequacy. Although the project alludes to this human mechanism I think that the images are open to more interpretations, in fact, they could represent, in my opinion, the set of clichés that women are forced to "wear".

In my perception, I classify it as a metaphor to reveal the prejudices that still "float" in the air despite society denying and how in a minimalist and austere environment women boldly survive. A feminine aspect that has been, maybe not intentionally, explored also by Arthur Tress. "Woman with Seven Sea Turtles"(1975) it's a picture portraying a semi-laying woman surrounded by land turtles, they appear almost in order around her body shape.

Arthur Tress invested his talent and work in the collection of nightmares, this specific picture belongs to the project ``Dream Collector"(1975) and has been created in collaboration with children interviewed by him in an attempt to concretize their dreams, extracting from oniric illusions and trying to concretize sensations, fears, trauma. I tried to observe the nightmare dynamic and I have identified a sort of metaphor where I see a woman who does not try to escape because she is faced with what she does not consider a danger, a tenuous animal like the turtle that does not belong to the category of predators, with a slowness that would never be able to tear you apart, but which in long term became insidious, proving to be fatal due to the trust placed and the possibility of malicious intentions...I perceive the attempted abuse by a camouflaged machismo, the "pluralism" of turtles probably goes to represent the community that adheres to this idea of male chauvinism and that it wants to start "gently" to then devour the woman in all points. A series of monsters that derive and exist in the real world that impacts and has repercussions on the human psyche.

In fact of bringing to light the contemporary social and modern weaknesses

The world of art seems to have acquired a greater sensibility and responsibility, in late '90

Daniela Rossell a Mexican Photographer started to build up a project called

"Rica y famosas"(1999) is a high representation of exaggerated luxury in the Mexican

society. Analysing the entire series composed of 19 images that evokes the pomp, the

"splendour" and ostentation of the objects that almost "swallows" women cancelling their

identity, characterized above all by the fact that these women were inspired and

moved by the desire to chase an American model. Despite that what it reveals instead is the

typical look that recalls the obsolete and kitsch 90s Latin American telenovela. The various

scenes are all consumed in a domestic context which raises a legitimate reflection, that is the

comparison between an internal world made of glitter, baroque, power and domination that is

in contrasts with the surrounded Mexican dilapidated reality.

I believe that the presence of felines is an eloquent way to affirm and “convince”

about their authoritative and “majestic” personality, animals that outside their natural habitat often are destined to live caged and that in my point of view are going to incarnate these women armoured and trapped within gilded walls, by their sense of emulation and lack of individualism. Women who want transpire eroticism, in a low-level form, lying down under the fresco in a space that reminds me of a Hammam, I suppose more attentive to their own carnal needs, the pleasure of the flesh and the materialism of a human being whose spirituality is dissolved and being replaced by an exaltation of the ego. The work of Daniela Rossell reminds me of a monologue of Al Pacino, in “The Devil’s Advocate”(1997) the role of God and devil, the conflict between good and evil.

“God is a sadist, he is an absent landlord....I have natured every sensation the man has been inspired to have and I never rejected him despite all his imperfections I am a fan of man, I am a humanist....who in a right mind could possibly deny that the 20th century was entirely mine” (The Devil’s Advocate, 1997).

Is also relevant in numerous images the presence of sacred and profane symbols, a crucifix in distance index of a detachment from the interior inner, a background with the painting of the Last Supper (L. Da Vinci, 1495-1498) and in the foreground a table without diners to underline the sense of emptiness around her and moreover perceived in her lost look as she were becoming aware of the fact that the material wealth is not a synonymous of joy. the Antichrist symbol 666 as view and “font of inspiration”. The sensual pose, the element of binoculars to look from another perspective the disadvantaged reality outside, the height of the skyscraper suggesting the apparent sense of superiority and the pride to being in an elevate social position.

All represented in its power of an exterior wealth combined with spiritual poverty.
Perhaps, the more appropriate name for this series would have been

“Ricas,Famosas y Infeliz”.

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FIGURE 1: “True Love Wall” (1976) Photographer Chriss Killip. Yossi Milo Gallery, New York



FIGURE 2: "In Between" Series (2008/2009) Living Room, 2009-Chandelier, 2009- Dressing Gown,2009-Green Dress,2009- Broken Glass,2009- Hallway, 2008- Kitchen, 2008- Bamboo, 2008-Ferns, 2008- Mirror, 2008- Staircase, 2008- Violin, 2008- Bedroom,2008- Cupboards,2008 Photographer: Julia Fullerton Batten



Living Room, 2009



Changelier, 2009



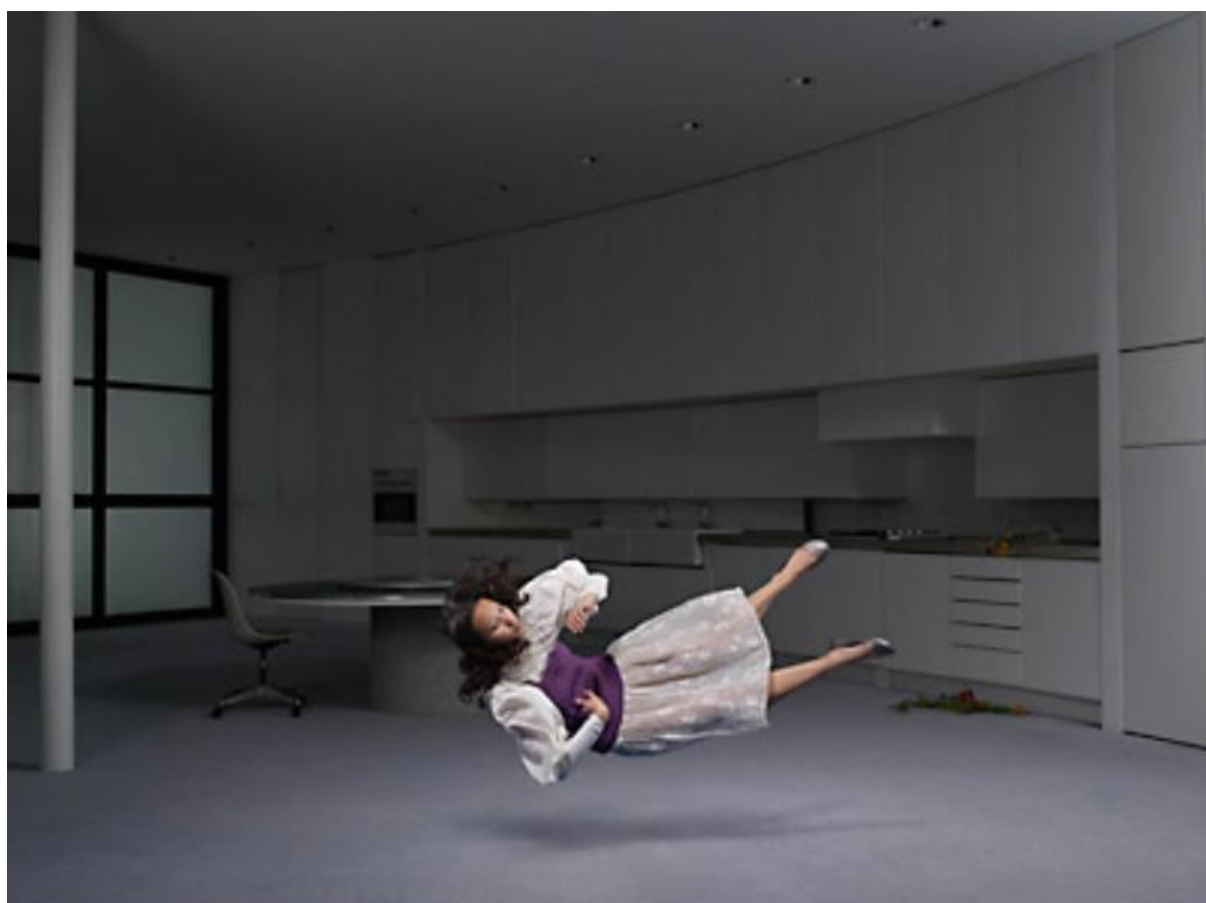
Dressing Gown, 2009



Broken Glass, 2009



Hallway, 2008



Kitchen, 2008

Kitchen, 2008



Bamboo, 2008



Ferns, 2008



Mirror, 2008



Staircase, 2008



Bedroom, 2008

FIGURE 3: "Woman with Seven Sea Turtles" (1975) Photographer: Arthur Tress

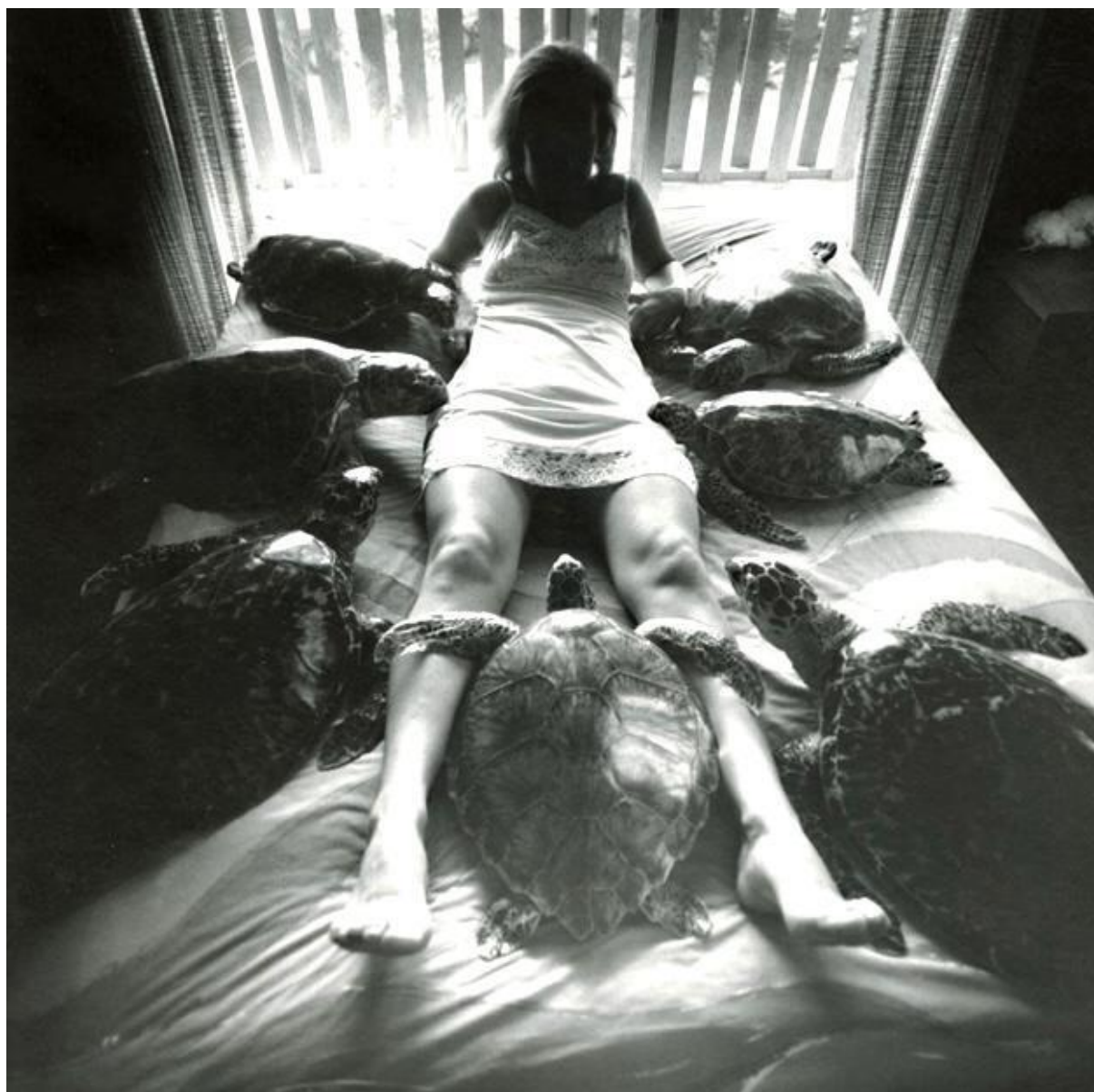


FIGURE 4: “Ricas y Famosas” Series of 19 images (1999) Photographer: Daniela Rossell







