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8. POST-PRODUCTION ASPECTS IN PERFORMATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

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Abstract: *Appropriation is one of the determining concepts of the post-productive theory, denoting the choice of an object and its use or modification according to a specific intention. Operating in an index of famous images from universal art, the photographer artist calls upon the performative strategies of the environment to structure behavioral positionings observed in social space. The series of examples accesses a segment of these artistic practices in which the biblical icon plays the role of the symbolic reference, but especially of the pretextual condition within the author's conceptual construction.*

Key word: *post-production, appropriation, performative photography, biblical icon, visual communication*

1. Introduction

The art of postproduction brings the interpretation, reproduction, re-exposition and use of different cultural products made by others, thus contributing to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, ready-made and original work. Appropriation is one of the determining concepts of the post-productive theory, denoting the choice of an object and its use or modification according to a specific intention. Inscribing their works in a network of signs and meanings by reprogramming forms and reorienting data flows (Barthes 1985), post-production artists pose the problem of producing current meanings in the face of a chaotic mass of objects, names, references that have invaded everyday life.

We can therefore speak of the initiation of a common place of post-production practices, as cultural recycling, which changes the status of the artist and the work of art, in a manner similar to that described by Nicolas Bourriaud[203]: "Notions of originality and even creation (making something out of nothing) are fading little by little in this new cultural landscape marked by the twin figures of the DJ and the programmer, both tasked with selecting cultural objects and inserting them into already established contexts." The consequence of this new artistic configuration is the modification of the status of the work from a final product to a cooperative activity, open to everyday, democratic use: "In this new form of culture, which we could describe as a culture of use or a culture of activity, the work of art therefore functions as the temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements, as a narrative that prolongs and reinterprets the previous narratives".

2. A critical approach of postproduction

For his part, Bruce-Alister Barber sees the parodic attitude of simulationism as a perverse-cynical strategy of cultural marketing, concluding that the recycling of

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[203] This aspect of cultural recycling was discussed by Nicolas Bourriaud in "Postproduction" (Bourriaud 2003, 6)

art history opened up by postmodernism represents "a appropriation of history in order to secure one's own place in history" (Barber n.d.). Hal Foster finds, however, that simulationism and appropriationism can be seen as ambivalent attitudes towards the idea of avant-garde and historical rupture, specific to a "cynical rationality": "For example, *neo-geo*[204] seemed to ironize abstraction in order to distance themselves from it, suggesting that it is reified, outdated and irretrievable, but not those who use it. At other times, however, they embraced this exhaustion as a form of protection: the paradoxical defense of what is already dead. This change of attitude from an ironic posture to a pathetic and abject object encountered in the early 1990s is an early sign of a crisis in critical discourse" (Foster 1996).

In appropriationist art, criticism tries to elaborate rather than reverse the deconstructive techniques of previous critical practices, such as conceptual art, institutional criticism, feminist art, etc. In the case of neo-geo, the artists used a simulacrum of representation, which produces its own referential reality as an abstraction. Finally, the project of representing the simulation process may not only mystify it; he can also reduce the notion of simulation to a simple theme (Foster 1996, 107). Replacing artistic forms with kitsch and design, "consumer sculpture" (found in the works of Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach) borrows from pop art criticism, but actually expresses an aesthetic of economy: their own artistic value as value exchange.[205]

That is why he calls the attitude launched in the eighties "cynical": the cynic recognizes his own convictions to be false or ineffective, but keeps them in order to defend himself in a contradictory way from the pressures of reality, schizophrenic - they no longer propose an "enlightenment of conscience" by demystifying consumption strategies. If the aesthetics of cynical reason was prepared for a double slide of ideology critique into contempt and deconstruction into complicity, appropriationism hastened this process - art continues through its preservation as a reified form and a usable repertoire of signs: "In fact, the aesthetics of cynical reason prepared by appropriationism appeared not only as a reaction to the claims of ideology criticism, but also as an exaggeration of deconstruction's skepticism regarding the stability of signs" (Foster 1996, 119).

By using artistic techniques such as appropriation, quotation, pastiche, going all the way to simulation, postmodern artists redefine the cultural baggage of the images or objects they use. Reporting to the everyday world, as well as the introduction of appropriate elements from all cultural spheres into artistic projects lead to the emphasis of a culture of parody, which expresses the critical reflection of postmodernity on its own heritage and its possibilities to be continued. In this context, performative photographic practices have alternated the role of the human body as a vehicle, from working methods concerned with self-representation (Bright 2011), to the broad directorial strategies found on film sets.

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[204] The *neo-geo* style is often seen as a continuation of the traditions, not so much of the classical geometric abstraction of the first half of the 20th century, but of Pop art. Neo-geo is an abstraction of the postmodern era, which rejected both the utopian ambitions of Malevich or Mondrian and the highly personal and dramatic beginnings of abstract expressionism (Neo-minimalismo o Neo-Geometrismo 2020).

[205] Hal Foster approaches this aspect in his book “The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the Turn of the Century” (Foster 1996, 110-112). Discussed by Catalin Gheorghe in “Conditia Critica” (C. Gheorghe 2010) and Mihai Verestiuc in his article “Object and objecthood in post-minimal sculpture” (Verestiuc 2022), also briefly resumed in the exhibitions analyses from Aparte Gallery. Exhibitions from 2021 (Gheorghe, et al. 2020).

The narrative and illustrative aspects of performative photography, accustomed to constructions staged in front of the camera, could not bypass biblical subjects. Their intrinsic meanings have always been a challenge for post-production practices due to the offer of interpretive multiplications. We already know several examples of artists interested in religious themes since the pioneering years of photography (Cotton 2004). With the transition into the 20th century, concerns regarding the transfigurations of biblical imagery embrace the conditions of changes due to social emancipations. If for centuries religious visual archetypes have been self-mimicking by relocating their educative and moralizing functions, we can say that in the appropriate interpretations of contemporary artists they fulfill a pretextual role, keeping only formally identifiable elements. Of course, representations of this kind also encountered situations in which the authors were more interested in possible dogmatic overexcitability or in gratuitous exposures of nudity. However, the provocative aspect of the speeches was not always accidental, it aimed to direct attention to concepts with a declarative role (German and Teodorescu 2016).

3. Postproduction in performative photography

The pictorial representations of Saint Sebastian made by Guido Reni (1575–1642) in the early Baroque period, equally inspired both Luigi Ontani and the duo of French artists Pierre et Gilles. If the Italian photographically experienced living paintings, in a contemporary formula of Viennese Actionism, through which he sought his own "transistor" journey through myth, mask and symbol, loaded with the extrasensory experiences acquired in his Asian travels, for Pierre et Gilles, twenty years later, the subject reached the dimension of an iconographic transfiguration regarding the ideal of the ancient human body. The image of Saint Sebastian has attracted the attention of many artists since the Renaissance due to the opportunity to represent the male anatomical ideal without obstacles (Sofron 2015).

Pierre et Gilles take Guido Reni's model and introduce it into their enchanted world, comprising fairy-tale paradises and abyssal depths, loaded with quotations from contemporary popular visual languages, but also from art history. In the vision of the French tandem, Saint Sebastian tied to the pillar with a garland of red flowers, his face is made up, and his not contorted body exudes an effeminate attitude (Fig. 1). The faded vegetal setting, which frames the central figure shrouded in diffused light, deepens the sense of an artificial staging, meant to call attention to a new kind of torment, that of accepting one's own beauty. Dissatisfied with the advent of digital retouching, the two artists construct the images by hand: Pierre behind the lens, Gilles through subsequent interventions with paint. The characters portrayed are constantly placed between the ultra-publicized pop idols and the delicate figures found in religious icons, causing surprising glamor prototypes to emerge. Their seductive and complex paintings with multiple interpretive layers exert an intense visual power and transgress traditional moral codes by experimenting in a territory of social clichés.

Published almost thirty years later, Terry O'Neill's photograph, *Raquel Welch on the Cross*, from 1966, waited hidden from the eyes of viewers, conditioned perhaps by the release of certain moral precepts, which the author himself motivated by his upbringing Catholic and imposed on them (Fig. 2). At a time when censorship

restrictions still stifled sensual presences in the world of the big screen, Raquel Welch was filming for the film production One Million Years BC. The fact that the actress was dressed in a fur bikini in the film aroused the violent attention of the media world. Raquel confessed to Terry O'Neill that she felt crucified by the press.

This statement led the British photographer to stage at the 20th Century Fox studios the image that later became one of the artist's most reproduced works. In Terry O'Neill's opinion "the photograph is mostly for women because they identify with the idea that other people can make them feel horrible about themselves." The beautiful young woman in the biblical interpretation became a symbol of the freedom of expression martyred by social conventions, with post-feminist accents, which had to pass the test of the years for an unprejudiced reception. Bettina Rheims' album *INRI*, from 2000, made with the help of her friend Serge Bramly, writer, globe-trotter and photographer himself, was based on the interpretation of the Gospel in a completely contemporary key, which mirrors the transformations of our society, morals, revolt and at the same time the still existing appetite for spirituality.

Bettina Rheims treated those scenes by exploiting the codes of traditional religious representation as she had done in other fields with the figures of stars or transsexuals as subjects. In this endeavor she called on all her knowledge as a fashion photographer. The painstaking preparation of the project took more than a year, with the artist going through a collective reading of passages from the Gospels before each session to feed the meanings of the photographs and look for the right patterns. The figures of Jesus and the Virgin are thus multiple, selected after discussions regarding the particularities of each scene to be constructed (Soreanu 2016). The series, not being tributary to a single selected person, turns out to be enriched, because the models chosen in their diversity with the methods of specialized agencies are mixed with workers, plumbers or other anonymous figures, to better complement the interpretation thought by Bettina Rheims. The coherence of the whole is due to the originality of each photograph, the unity of the locations chosen in the area of the eastern suburbs of Paris, but also the permanent references in the painting (Teodorescu 2014).

The scene of the baptism of Jesus is an adaptation of the 1450 version by Piero della Francesca. If in the painting, St. John the Baptist and Jesus form a pair from a theological point of view, Bettina Rheims' image shows two twins, each of them playing the role of one of the characters who would later be martyred. Another example of an illustrative quotation can be found in the photograph of Christ appearing dead, an obvious homage to Andrea Mantegna's painting of 1480. But while the Italian painter softened the perspective by shrinking the feet to capture the head of the Savior, the photographer chooses a short focal length to operate an optical inversion to painting, a dissimulating option of the mystical concept and closer to everyday reality.

Whenever miracles are exhibited in illustrative theatricality, Bettina Rheims refuses to use the "magic" of the medium to perform digital tricks. On the contrary, she tried to place photography on the level of painting by introducing allegorical and symbolic references. In this sense, the crucifixion episode called *INRI* (Fig. 3), could be seen as a manifesto in the area of staged photography, Bettina Rheims resorting to the structured representation of a triptych (German 2018). The

surprising ensemble is composed of three distinct images, each containing a cross.

The center of the triptych features an empty cross painted with blood, as a reference to the modern gestural painting and Actionism of the time represented by the work of Arnulf Rainer, but also symbolizing the sacrificed body of the Savior. On the left a female model is crucified, while on the right a man appears. Both poses outline a photographic equivalent inspired by Diego Velasquez, in the painting *Jesus on the Cross* (ca. 1632). The artist declared herself surprised to find that none of the male models could reproduce the sensuality, even the effeminacy of the personifications found in the typologies of religious art. The photographic triptych symbolizes the essentialized human figure of Christ materialized through Velasquez's crucified androgyne. Through this work, Bettina Rheims particularly draws attention to the recent polemics regarding the place of women in the Church, in relation to the strictly male ordination of priests.

For Gregor Podgorski, the theme of Michelangelo's *Pieta* becomes an almost obsessive basic concept. The interpretations of this sculpture send to a symbolic fan, provoking disputes that concern the entire universe of human life: cultural, social, or political. The artist configures in the same square frame compositions that always contain two characters with different costumes and make-up, framed by a new scenography prop. Encouraging the audience to intercultural analytical attitudes, the series of hundreds of photographic staging overflows into unusual poses, which the two characters, seen as a relational pretext, can take: the librarian and the reader, the Cuban fighter and the American tourist, the intellectual and the clown, etc. (Fig. 4). The anthological moment of the *Last Supper* in the representation of Leonardo da Vinci is most often transposed in post-production photography with biblical inspiration. The performative aspects and scenography direction caused by the panoramic view of a number of thirteen characters, seen from the front, challenge a multitude of artists plastically and compositionally. Some of them have found novel formulas of association and diversion with which to publicize their concepts.

Adi Nes recomposes images from traditional pictorial iconography with a religious subject in photographs that rewrite scenes from the Old and New Testaments in a contemporary political key. His works acquire a conceptual element that is subversive and reflexive at the same time, problematizing, with the help of appropriating established artistic forms, the existing conflicting situations at the ideological level in today's society. *The Last Supper* makes direct reference to Leonardo da Vinci's fresco, made between 1495 and 1498, for the dining hall of the Dominican monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. The scene depicts the last commandment given by Jesus to the apostles, the night before he was captured by the Romans. According to the Gospels, He reveals His betrayal and sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, then passing on the bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood. This moment is also central to the calendar in Judaism, as it represents the night of the Exodus.

Nes combines the Christian sacrifice with that of the liberation of the Jewish people, in the struggle of every soldier who does his duty in the military service in Israel. The *Last Supper* recreated in a pot replaces Jesus and the 12 future preachers of the Christian faith with Israeli soldiers (Fig. 5). The parodic representation goes beyond the banal realism of the depicted scene, the author perhaps involuntarily

putting in the parable the parallel aspects of the historical perception of the Jews: as representatives of the chosen people or as judges of Christ. However, it seems that Nes' intention is different. He primarily refers to the aspect of sacrifice and loneliness in the face of death. The chromaticism dominated by cazon green is broken by the red spots of the bowls on the table, symbolic hints of a meat dinner. The author structures the composition by arranging the characters in active groups of three soldiers, who do not interact at all with the one in the middle. This one, placed geometrically as Jesus, framed in the window revealing an arid landscape, has his head superimposed over a thorn bush in the background.

The lost look of the young man in the center, chosen as the author confesses because he was the only one wearing glasses, suggests that the sacrifice of the Israeli soldier, unlike that of Jesus, is anonymous. "Death comes at a trivial moment, not a heroic one," adds Adi Nes. The composition mainly reflects the classical layout. The artist also resorts to an artifice, adding in the right part of the frame, standing, a fourteenth soldier wearing the badge with the media logo, an element that would symbolically formulate the suggestion that the scene is related to a certain reality. *The Last Supper*, The *Emmaus Dinner*, as well as the other works belonging to the series, are clear examples of the way in which formal appropriation can, beyond the often conjunctural comic effect, critically use the difference from the image used as a source and reading code in the goal of a lucid analysis of contemporary life.

In another photo-performative order, the American artist Renée Cox discusses the disputes on racial themes, still current from the end of the 20th century, in the series of self-portrait works entitled *Yo Mama*. *Yo Mama's Last Supper* represents a careful reconstruction of the Last Supper, but with the black artist in the center of the image as Jesus, offering her naked body in a symbolic and ritualistic manner to men of the same race, who occupy the roles of the apostles in the composition (Fig. 6). The direct reference to the symbols of bread and wine touches here on the issue of sexuality through a visual reformulation of power calculations in an African American society recognized as decent and conservative. In another work from the *Yo Mama* series, Renée Cox shows herself naked, as a strong woman rather than a voluptuous one, wearing only a pair of black high heels and holding her two-year-old son years. This is an image of a regal and, at the same time, erotic *Madonna*, which underlines the change in the idea of representing mothers in history, namely a new approach to a mentality that no longer wants to submit to the category concept of segregation based on the racist definition of the "normal man" (Alfano Miglietti 2003, 59).

In a nearby area, David LaChapelle's interpretation proposes a parodic reconstruction of biblical scenes set in an environment populated with hip-hopers. Jesus "visits" the groups of these young people in their urban environment, loaded with subcultural visual attributes, coming especially from the costumes specific to their own music and dance. Reconfiguring Jacopo Tintoretto's 1563-1564 painting *The Last Supper* in his own vision, David LaChapelle creates a brightly colored, circular composition in an apartment room in which he places the central figure of Jesus surrounded by 12 young Latinos and Afro - tattooed Americans, wearing caps, tank tops or sweatpants (Fig. 7). The Savior's gesture seems to bless or distribute the wine and the other foods on the table: fruit, hamburgers, biscuits, and juices.

The ambiguous atmosphere is amplified with the appearance of a young blonde, on the door to the right of the frame, probably personifying Mary Magdalene. Recognized for his unconventional approaches, David LaChapelle does not hesitate to touch on social issues, the parodic dimension introduced by the author being identified this time by the association of the apostles with their substitutes, recognized for their fervent and protestant speech in the form of rhymes (LaChapelle 2021). Wang Qingsong's version of The Last Supper, *Safe Milk* (2009), appeared as a reaction to a food scandal that swept across China (Fig. 8).

It is about the contamination of milk and milk powder intended for infants with certain dangerous substances. The author elaborates the photo behind a 9-meter table on which he poured yogurt. He invites 10 models with different typologies, bare-breasted, to sit down, and he will place himself in the middle of them. On the right of the image, standing is a pregnant woman, volunteer, according to Wang Qingsong. A ghostly, almost grotesque apparition, the figure of the artist with the bandaged nipples is the key to the interpretive deciphering of the photograph. Joined as a pair to the model that simulates the squeezing of milk from the breasts, it achieves the equivocal contrast of the choices conditioned by the form in which the advertisement of a product is dressed (Qingsong 2020).

4. Conclusions

The series of examples above accesses the segment of artistic practices in which the biblical icon plays the role of symbolic reference, but especially of the pretextual condition within the author's conceptual construction (Teodorescu 2012). The staging does not necessarily involve the use of a frame extracted from religious subjects, so operating rather in an index of famous images from universal art, the photographic artist calls on the performative strategies of the environment to structure behavioral positionings observed in the social space. The archetype used does not actually determine the theme, but facilitates direct perception, acting as a visual vehicle that carries the viewer to the connotative aspects of the work.

List of figures

Fig. 1. Pierre et Gilles, *Saint Sébastien*, 1987, accessed 24.11.2022, online source: https://artblart.com/tag/pierre-et-gilles-the-martyrdom-of-st-sebastian/

Fig. 2. Terry O'Neill, *Raquel Welch on the Cross*, 1966, accessed 24.11.2022, online source: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/terry-oneill-raquel-welch-on-cross-1

Fig. 3. Bettina Rheims, *INRI*, 1999, accessed 24.11.2022, online source: https://www.lempertz.com/en/catalogues/artist-index/detail/rheims-bettina.html

Fig. 4. Gregor Podgorski, *Pieta*, 1999, accessed 24.11.2022, online source: https://www.transphotographiques.com/2001/05/gregor-podgorski-la-pieta/

Fig. 5. Adi Nes, *The Last Supper*, 1999, accessed 24.11.2022, online source: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/adi-nes-untitled-last-supper

Fig. 6. Renée Cox, *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, 1996, accessed 24.11.2022, online source: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/renee-cox-yo-mamas-last-supper

Fig. 7. David LaChapelle, *The Last Supper*, 2003, accessed 24.11.2022, online source: https://www.davidlachapelle.com/last-supper

Fig. 8. Wang Qingsong, *Safe Milk*, 2009, accessed 24.11.2022, online source: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/wang-qingsong-safe-milk

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