

## The truth of images Alec Von Bargaen at OCAT Shanghai

In *Veritas Feminae*, there is the convincing and incontestable persuasion that a story is never truly individual, inasmuch as it belongs to everybody, to all the people who had the chance to witness it, fortuitously intercept it. Life experience is collective also because it presents certain recurring patterns. This by no way means that it can be predictable.

Alec Von Bargaen's series of twelve unconventional multimedia portraits works on two levels: one is the individual, virtually unknown story that he wants to make known; the other entails a reference to the lives of famous women. Each photographic installation presents anonymous women paralleled for poignant and specific reasons to very famous female artists. The connection between two experiences is already implicitly present, but the artist gives it further significance, showing how there is a whole level of understanding of facts which is much more subtle and needs the work and commitment of a "third party" (and a medium) to be revealed.

This is the power of photography: it discloses unpredictable truths and through a static image activates a dynamic series of thoughts and reactions. It forces our brain into motion, maybe because photographic images are incomplete in their evoking situations (only one shot among a virtually infinite range of choices) or maybe because in order to exist, the sense of the image is prompted, activated by the eyes and gaze of who looks at it. Alec has always been interested in the "anthropological" value of photography and in the research that can be carried out through it, not simply for the sake of a "nice shot" but for catching glimpses of truth, or any other ineffable element beyond the surface of a well-constructed image.

All the women Alec chooses are 'underdogs', not because they were doomed to suffering, but because they are blessed with the typical fragility common to all (really) sentient beings. One thing women portrayed by him share is also that the more they lose the more they gain. They're simply not interested in obtaining the 'first prize', or that which is considered desirable, because they have already obtained what they wanted: to live life on their own terms. In this mad world women can still afford to wonder for how long to manifest emotions, to react to pain in a creative way and turn it into an experience. Yet it is precisely this right to be vulnerable which makes them us invincible: Von Bargaen seems fascinated by this paradox and has explored all it entails: the known and unknown, the public and private, following the women which have now become "myth" and those which without his camera and his eyes would have otherwise been condemned to anonymity.

As for the female artists chosen to parallel the images in the project, he has picked them because "nothing of what they did, nothing of what they said, was gratuitous." That's why, in some way, they have always been part of his consciousness.

Quite interestingly, the double identity each work implies also hides both tragic destinies and unknown outcomes. Many of the famous women Von Bargaen has decided to evoke or pay homage to have met a violent death, or have chosen to die. On the "unknown" side of the project, there is something thrilling and subtly subversive in the idea that chance (what some call "fate") can bring to light stories nobody would normally know. This is also one of the many "duties" of an artist, together with the capacity to transform chance into an object or an image that can sublimate the nature itself of life chaos and fortuitousness. This is what Alec Von Bargaen has been doing with "his" women and their stories.

The first conceptual 'diptych' presented at OCAT is called *Sara's Song* which is a piece composed of 56 images, 56 tiles. The title evokes Sara Teasdale, a famous American poet who committed suicide at the age of forty-nine. She is the author of a poem that many believe was written after Vachel Lindsay's (the love of her life) death by suicide, but which was actually composed much earlier, and in which she seems to anticipate and somehow announce her own suicide eighteen years before the

fact. On the other hand, the 'true' woman in the photographic portrait is an anonymous person the artist casually met in the south of Spain. She was in a restaurant having dinner with her husband, whom after having yelled at her, stood up and left her sitting alone. Under the spotlight, she made a desperate effort to look as calm as possible, trying fruitlessly to recompose the pieces of her smashed life. Her image is almost unbearable in the discomfort and resigned hopelessness it denounces, but at the same time we can perceive a dignity in it, in the way she stares at the camera and looks right into it, and into us. As with the life of this woman, the work itself tries to reconstruct the scattered pieces it is made of into a coherent image. Separation ultimately converges into the essence itself of the woman's suffering.

In the photographic installation *There Is A Place Where The Pavement Ends And The Street Begins*, conceived in collaboration with Scottish artist Lyndsey Wardrop, Von Bargaen establishes a comparison, a contact which is much more than virtual, between two fragile creatures who have probably lived very similar lives, pushed by the same desire for attention and recognition. One is the now semi-mythological "Queen of Punk", Sid Vicious' lover and victim: Nancy Spungen; the other one is that of a pink-haired girl Von Bargaen's camera intercepted while she was distributing "free hugs" in New York's Union Square. The girl's absent gaze, sleepy expression and frequent visits to a public toilet denounced her heavy dependence on drugs, most likely heroin. So we could assume that to be the major aspect she and Nancy share. In reality, their addiction is only an accessory, it completes the picture of their psychological profile: they both are in desperate need of attention, besides, the fact that a "junkie" could be engaged in this kind of fashionable practice (free hugs), adds a surreal touch to the whole picture, because nobody wants to hug a junkie, nobody wants to get so close to human weakness and desolation. The beautiful pattern of cracks (scars?) formed by the smashed glass may be evoking the fragile substance they are made of. Like Nancy, this girl has never had, or has lost the possibility to have her own "family portraits": this is also the way Von Bargaen compensates this lack for her, he makes a monument for her and tries to be her family, with no need to let her know. That's why the work, in his warm coolness, is a silent monument to her solitude.

The third exhibited photographic work, a series of four images titled *Veritas Feminae*, gives the name to the overall project and derives from the juxtaposition of two similar female profiles, both characterized by androgyny and refusal of social conventions. One is the sophisticated nineteenth century novelist Amantine Aurore Dupin, known with the *nom de plume* of George Sand, considered to be among the first women – if not the first one – to have used "cross-dressing" to intentionally play with genders and the social/public perception of gender roles separation. On the other side, or better said, on the "image" side, the woman we see on in the four images is a Chicago photographer and artist who is used to working at night in jazz clubs, taking pictures of musicians. During the day she lives in a sort of alienated state, a form of self-exile, which serves to feed her unconventional approach to photography and life. For Von Bargaen she has a disquieting way to relate to people around her, she uses the camera as a filter/shield to protect herself and maybe as a justification for her behavior. As an artist mainly working with the camera, Von Bargaen knows far too well how reassuring the shelter of a camera can be.

The images of her show different parts of the same shot out of focus, or better yet, there are only small portions of her face and shoulder, which are never completely out-of-focus. The work also comprises five corresponding videos: photographic animation where the images fade out and in – just like the presence of this woman in other people's lives – and the sudden shifts of background female voices, from cheerfulness to pain and anxiety. This vagueness corresponds to the way she escapes people's expectations about "normal" and conventional behavior, about her deep-rooted tendency to avoid any direct, engaging contact.

The fourth work included in the exhibition is called *Bolshevik Pas de Deux*, a site-specific piece created specifically for the museum, inspired by the revolutionary dancer Isadora Duncan, who met a tragic death after a life punctuated with dramatic facts and losses, including the accidental death of her two sons and the suicide of her husband, the Russian poet Sergey Yesenin. The woman whose close-up is reproduced is a "sweeping dancer" the artist met inside a temple in Myanmar. A refugee from Cambodia who has escaped the Pol Pot regime, she was sweeping the pavement of the temple together with a companion, as if in a duet, removing the dust and filth. In reality she was only "relocating" the filth, as the dust was simply shifted, continuously covering the same spot. For an average western observer this is a pointless action, a waste of time, but in the ancient wisdom inspired by the Buddhist doctrine it is the action itself and the spiritual purification brought along by gestures and focused movements which matters, certainly not the result or the time employed to achieve it. For Von Bargaen this belongs to the nature of women: the awareness that an action should be done for the symbolic value it holds and for the life-lasting influence its accomplishment will exert, not for the gain it will immediately bring.

So, all of these women, famous and unknown, seem to share common actions and deeds which at a superficial level may appear completely pointless, odd at best, at times even harmful and self-destructive. They might be so sometimes, but the logic behind them is the desire to live coherently with one's own belief.

The dichotomy between anonymity and fame is recomposed in Alec Von Bargaen's project, the stories we don't know become central and evoke/interact with the story we know all too well. They add to them a new value and fresh significance, making them even more plausible and real, less mythological and more relevant with our lives. At the same time, paradigmatic and unique vicissitudes of unknown women rise to prominence and gain a status of exemplarity, forever encapsulated in the artist's vision/memory, therefore also in our gaze/judgment.

The *fil rouge* of these stories and the elaborated images and structures which accompany them, forming the overall *Veritas Feminae* body of work, is desperation: sometimes it embodies ultimate closure and paralysis, the impossibility to move forward, but most of the times it is a creative force that simply cannot be reduced to any assessed and traditional narrative, escaping any conclusion.

As artistic director at OCAT Shanghai, I am happy and honored to have the opportunity to show a selection of works from Alec Von Bargaen's project *Veritas Feminae*. Alec saw the space and thought it could be perfect for the launch of the book, I saw his work and thought it could be perfect for an exhibition to be set up here. But it's much more than this. It's slightly more than simple coincidence and right timing. We both understood how important is to give people a voice, no matter how and when, always and at all costs, when projects take shape they start living a whole separate life and this demands attention, care and respect.

That's what we did.

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