

HER/STORY. WOMEN BEHIND THE CAMERA

HISTORY OF A PROJECT. by Carolina Lio

Were it not for the risk to make it too long, a more correct title would be: "Women behind and in front of the camera". Indeed, Her/Story is basically a weave of women investigating on themselves and on other women, a crossing of human contacts - not always lucky - and a set of ideas, conflicts, crisis and solutions that never move womanliness to the background. This project won the EEA Grants of the Norwegian Embassy in Madrid and was, therefore, accomplished through the funds of the richest country in Europe, and perhaps in the world, in order to promote a cultural and social exchange. Why did they chose the project Her/Story?

Being the curator, it would be difficult to objectively evaluate it if the circumstances hadn't arranged my arrival in the board of Her/Story only in the end. I will explain why and I will tell you the human as well as the professional plots that have actually built a path of almost one year of work. Meanwhile, having made it clear that the project was not started by me, I can take the liberty of a consideration, which I think is quite objective, on the value of the project.

Why did Her/Story win the EEA grants? Discarding the hypothesis that there were no other competing proposals, my viewpoint is that this exchange, as conceived by Spanish artist Cristina Nuñez and as amplified by the case and by circumstances, it is interesting because of its various extremes connected together. The basic extreme is obviously the political, social and economic duality between Spain and Norway. Mediterranean country, suffering a strong economic crisis with its consequent social repercussions, Spain has recently experienced very difficult years, becoming one of the poorest countries of the EU. The crisis of Spanish property market has made headlines around the world for its almost sci-fi devaluation, and as unemployment rises and welfarism decreases, social discontent is growing, sharpening the desire for independence of territories such as Catalunya. On the contrary, Norway has never been so supportive to itself, solid, proud and prosperous. After the

yearned independence from Sweden, the pledge to be paid was high. A great poverty had bent the country, that has been almost magically taken up thanks to the discovery of petroleum in the '60s, quickly becoming not only the richest country in Europe, but also the one with the best sharing of wealth. So the Norwegians, proud of being such, are well-off and self-confident people in a country under renewal.

Cristina Nuñez, in the wake of her autobiographical and self-therapeutic researches, decided to analyze the deep and antithetical differences between the two countries from the point of view of the "weaker sex". In Mediterranean countries, the woman is still "the second sex" as expressed by a great intellectual, Simone de Beauvoir. The culture of southern Europe has basically remained anchored to the idea of the woman-mother, a pivotal figure of the society only if taken in the family context. The woman, in short, fulfills her own life when she becomes bride - better if devoted - and then mother. Career and projectuality are seen as youthful values for a single woman, almost passing fancies destined to extinction and to meet something more stable and serious, which is the classic figure of the woman very close to her man and her children. They are countries where the word "spinster", notwithstanding it is used less and less in favor of more politically correct terms, still makes sense. And even more sense does it have the word "sacrifice," which for a woman is supposed to be spontaneous and natural. The female independence is of course conceived and ever craved, but vulgarly identified with sexual boldness and awareness, jumping from the frying pan into the fire. The woman, with the illusion of winning a position in the world, seeks her own value in the beauty and in the power of seduction, voluntarily becoming a sex object in order to grasp the privileges that are offered in exchange by a power that is still sexist .

To explain how in the Norwegian society - and, I guess, in Nordic culture in general - the idea about women is rather different, a short anecdote is enough. I was with Cristina Nuñez in Oslo on the occasion of her workshop at the Oslo Fotokunstscole (among other things, directed by woman and artist Yamile Calderon). My part of the job was pretty quick and easy. I had to explain to the students who had joined the workshop, what

was expected from them as artistic contribution in the project Her/Story. I explained to them that what the project had to pull out was an analysis of how women felt themselves placed in their own society and in their own daily lives. I explained the domestic role that is expected from women in Mediterranean cultures, and seeing them rather bewildered, in order to solicit an interaction, I asked if this is the way of understanding femininity in Norway too. From their blankly looks, I realized that they had no idea what I was talking about and, perhaps, they were clinging to some literary or cinematic heritage in order to imagine the situation. At my next, more precise question "what is important for a woman in Norway?", the answer of one of the girls was "career", followed by the endorsement of her classmates.

Of course life is not - or rather, it is no longer - made up of stereotypes and categorizations that exclude any other way. However I found my brief exchange of views with the students quite revealing. Even more revealing Cristina Nuñez found her exchange of ideas with the first Norwegian artist involved in the project, Lotte Konow Lund.

Lotte Konow Lund is a well known artist in Norway and in its capital city. Her work has immediately had good recognition, allowing her to obtain a lifelong grant for life in the form of a monthly stipend offered by her government. This makes Norway a farsighted country, caring for its own talents, welfarist towards artists that in other countries, including Spain, are a weak social class in the grip of economic uncertainties. And this makes Lotte a successful and recognized artist who can continue her research without the anxiety of having a return from the market, allowing her to be intellectually free and independent. Thus, her research has been free to change over time, becoming more and more conceptual, without the fear that this could compromise the laws of the market to which many artists from other countries are instead constrained. Therefore, following what was probably also her personal evolution, Lotte has gone from an early period in which the work on her own body was deeply felt, almost violent and full of protest, to a mature phase more static, meditative, quiet, that observes the world in a rational inquiry. While at first the protagonist of her work was the body, then gradually the subject moved outward, toward the inanimate object.

The direction, as she openly declares, is to draw the boundary between her private and professional life as an artist. A boundary that she sees as inescapable and that she often mentions in the work that has prepared for Her/Story: an editing of about twenty minutes from the six-hour conversation held with Cristina Nuñez in Barcelona during the winter of 2013. On that occasion, the two artists met and filmed their structured dialogue on various topics: existence in general, contemporary art, market and research, their own childhood and life, their relationship with the body, with feelings, with femininity, with the outside world.

It is precisely here that another extreme comes out very powerful, so powerful that a few weeks after Lotte Konow Lund chose to abandon the project and limited her presence (which was originally meant to be larger) to the video-editing of the conversation. Indeed, they came out deep differences between the two artists and two women; ultimately, between the two cultures. Deep faults, dissimilarities that could not coexist and adapt to each other.

Cristina Nuñez, indeed, has always worked on the pain making it the protagonist of her life and of her art, which in no case sees as disjointed parts. Art is her own therapy, a therapy that does not aim to defeat pain, but to keep it, discovering its beauty. In her video-trilogy prepared for Her/Story, entitled "La vie en rose", Cristina talks to a hypothetical future lover to whom asks to fall in love with her through her artwork. In the videos she talks about her loneliness, her pain, the feeling of being unsuitable and unacceptable, ugly, about the fear of rejection, the desire to die. She alternates her extreme character traits without hiding or soften them. She wants his imaginary observer to see her exactly as she is, arriving prepared and aware of her more black and more difficult sides that he will have to accept, to love, to share. For this reason Cristina takes herself both in simple everyday gestures (having breakfast) and in moments of deep despair in which she is filming herself naked and in tears, disclosing her own darkest and deepest thoughts.

Precisely the trilogy "La vie en rose" was one of the causes of estrangement from the project by the first invited artist, Lotte Konow Lund, which was followed by a second one who withdrew after few weeks as well, and by the two initial cu-

rators - Italian like me - that I replaced after a misunderstanding of both practical and artistic nature. Of course, it is not appropriate to talk about practical issues, while it is interesting for the correct interpretation of the project, to talk about the creative differences that, personally, I understand in both cases.

It is necessary to understand that Norwegian and Spanish societies are very different from each other. But first of all, it is even more important to understand that the contemporary global society, which unites the whole world in a forced and distorted vision of reality, is based on too commercial values, related with advertising and media. Contemporary philosophy - what remains of it - is difficult to distinguish from a slogan to sell a packet of crisps. The diktat is that of living in a positive way, of being the architects of our lives through the formulation of our thoughts, the imposition of a standard formula in order to be accepted, which consists in demonstrating success, flaunting joy and escaping from negativity. All this infects social and private lives of a form of glossy unreality in which we are clearly told to persuade ourselves that everything is going well. It is a vision somewhat more fashionable of the optimism stated by Voltaire's *Candide*: "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds". Indoctrinated according to this direction, the reaction that spontaneously arises in front of the open demonstration of pain, is a kind of superstition. Of fear. And of discomfort. For this reason, at the level of audience, it is not uncommon that video-screenings by Cristina Nuñez's works could embarrass or create rejection, because they bring into play that what we have been taught is wrong to accept and to show: the intimate pain. A dragon to keep at bay, locked up in a distant room, trying to pretend in the most natural way possible not to hear it screaming.

That said, even assuming that this first hurdle had been passed by, the differences between the approach of Cristina Nuñez and Lotte Konow Lund are undeniable. The second artist disapproves in the first one the merger between private life and art, the therapeutic function and the close autobiographical connection that Cristina sees as inescapable in her work. This position was supported by the initial two curators that subsequently withdrew from the project. On the other hand, also Cristina does not agree on

Lotte's position to keep a rational and analytical distance between the oneself-person and the oneself-artist and to conceive artworks as something detached from personal experiences and from one's own emotional components. Personally, I am fascinated by the very intimate vision of Cristina and my curatorial suggestions have always encouraged her extreme approach. By the way, being the curator of this project in its entirety, and having to adopt a professional glance and a neutral and somehow external perspective, I do see in this controversy which at first appears to be purely intellectual, the expression of a profound social dichotomy.

Lotte Konow Lund before being an artist, whether he likes it or not, she's a woman. A Norwegian woman. Her work is one of her priorities in the sense that she is interested in the new languages of contemporary art, tries to keep up with the times, to push her research in the direction that seems more interesting and appropriate in the context of the system to which belongs. Cristina Nuñez is a Spanish woman. In her recent work, there is the pressing need to find a love and a man who, as she herself admits, could protect and save her. She feels inadequate because is not canonically beautiful. She needs to rely on somebody, so she is dependent, and art is a means of therapy that she uses as a tool to be known by the world and to seek comfort in the beauty. She does not see art as an intellectual product in itself or as a purely professional practise. She does not belong to any pre-established system.

Of course, each of the two artists considers her own way more valid. Actually the two positions are both acceptable. The fact is, we've had extremely rational great artists as extremely emotional great artists. But within *Her/Story* is it interesting that the two positions have clashed as representatives not only of artistic approaches, but most of all of the two societies.

Now is the time to put this experience in parallel with the result that has occurred in the workshops held by Cristina Nuñez in Oslo. Two at the women's prison Bredtveit and one at the Oslo Fotokunstscole already mentioned a few paragraphs ago. On one side, women in prison with a unruly and painful life, many of them coming not from Norway but from South America,

so Hispanic; on the other side, young students by the promising future that represent a privileged class within the Norwegian society. To both of the two groups the same exercise has been proposed, consisting of standing in front of a camera and take a self-portrait. Thus said, it would seem simple. In practice, Nuñez's method is to let every single person communicate with the camera (therefore with an eye that peers into them) while they work on their deeper and more uncomfortable, emotions, such as fear, terror and pain. When they feel ready, each single person shoots three self-portraits, the results of which are usually pretty striking, the subject is almost unrecognizable and the real people, once the exercise is finished, often in tears.

This result is obtained both with young students, free and emancipated within a society that offers them a great future, or with women with shattered lives, abandoned by all, even by themselves. Moreover, I have seen the results of many other photographic workshops held by the same method in a wide variety of countries and with people of the most different social conditions. And, surprisingly, the outcome is always the same emotional - and beautiful - power. Shocking and overwhelming.

My personal deduction is that the social differences related to nationality, culture and social class, are like a skin that is easy to wear when it comes to intellectual matters, or to politics or economics. Or to art, as in the case of the conversation between Cristina Nuñez and Lotte Konow Lund. But at a deeper level there is a humanity that, if it finds an escape valve, erupts like a volcano a lava of repressed emotions that doesn't concern our "education" and our awareness of social norms and expectations. This part, which Cristina calls "higher self", indeed flies higher, flies over practical factors and talks about a naked humanity. We could even say, about a mother of humanity, wise enough to not have to cling to the external conventions to be herself.

Her/Story, in summary, is interesting because it compares extremes. The extreme of Spanish society and of the Norwegian one, two opposite countries within Europe. The extreme, in contemporary art, of two positions equally strong, but diametrically opposite to each other. The extreme among the promising female students and

the women imprisoned in the Bredtveit jail. The extreme between the self-control to which we all submit ourselves in order to be socially acceptable according to the rules imposed by our class, nationality and historical period and the extreme of our deepest emotions. Thus, both a personal and social research, both emotional and intellectual, is configured. The dualities that are compared are different and they create clashes that do not always have the maturity to become constructive. However, they make clear certain critical points and aspects of our world that, although they might not attain a fruitful integration, they will probably reach true acceptance.

After all, this is where history is taking humanity (the title "Her/story" was chosen because of its similarity with the word "history"). Indeed, while it unfortunately seems to be going towards a globalization that means flattening, leveling of habits, ideas and canons, on the other side history is struggling to build, day after day, a broader definition of "respect".

EXHIBITIONS:

BARCELONA

Dates: July 03-31, 2014.

Venue: H2O, Verdi, 152, Barcelona

OSLO

Dates: August 29-30, 2014.

Venue: Oslo Fotokunstscole, Waldemar Thranesgate 84, Oslo.

MADRID

Dates: September 23-30, 2014.

Venue: El Patio, Martín de los Heros, Madrid

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