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Who's Afraid of Women Photographers? 1839-1919

Exhibition from 14 october 2015 to 24 january 2016

There is a persistent idea that photography, a mechanical/chemical tool for reproducing images, is simply a question of technical skill, and therefore "something for men". However, women have played a more important role in the history of this medium than their fellow women artists have in the field of the traditional fine arts.
For the first time in France, the exhibition *Who's Afraid of Women Photographers?* presented at the Musée de l'Orangerie, tackles the first 80 years of this phenomenon, through its manifestations in France, Britain, Germany and the United States.

In order to investigate the negative impact of sexual identity in photographic images, masterpieces and hitherto unseen images are examined here, not from the angle of the whether a feminine viewpoint exists, but rather in terms of territories and strategies: territories of gender – physical and symbolic; strategies for critical or commercial success, and for pushing the boundaries of what can be photographed.

Through their choice of photography, the 75 women, some famous, some unknown, brought together in this exhibition, demonstrate that the expectations and prejudices directed at their sex were not *entirely* perceived as constraints. The number of images preserved today reveals how those women who produced them often managed to overcome their situation in life, and even to make use of it to give themselves greater freedom of action and expression. Whether these photographers worked towards this in isolation, or in some cases, as members of a group, it is important to appreciate how a practice that had for a long time been seen as a specifically feminine activity, in fact turned out to be a possible route to emancipation and subversion.

Becoming a Viewing Subject. Conventions and Social Interaction

The success of women's relationship with photography came out of their shared confinement to the margins of the art world. The governing ideology of 'separate spheres' in 19th century societies upheld more than ever, that the public sphere, the creative arts and matters of intellect should be reserved for men, and the domestic sphere - reproduction and affairs of the heart, reserved for women. It was against this background that the new invention was officially announced in 1839. At a crossroads of the arts, the sciences and industry, photography transcended all conventions. The necessary technical training, just like its operation, was not regulated by any structure comparable with those, which, for centuries, had restricted access to a career as a painter or sculptor on the grounds of gender, age and class.

Starting in 1840, dozens, then hundreds, of European and American women from a variety of social backgrounds were drawn towards a common medium. Through this, many seized the opportunity to increase their social interaction by frequenting the meeting places formed by the burgeoning networks of professional and amateur photographers. However different the aims may have been, these practices were certainly not yet thought of as anything other than collective and standardised, and compatible with the traditional concept of femininity. But whether they saw this principally as a source of income or as a means of creative fulfilment, all the women photographers in this exhibition at least found an opportunity through this medium to have a life apart from domestic obligations, and to enhance their individual powers of observation and judgement.

The British Amateur

In the mid-19th century, the British Isles became the cradle of an unparalleled phenomenon of female amateur photographers. Although not achieving the commercial success that its inventor, W.H Fox Talbot had hoped for, the photographic print on paper appealed to the enlightened circles of genteel Victorian society, who appreciated its aesthetic qualities, which were close to those of drawing and engraving. The practice of this new medium, judged to be all the more suitable for ladies once it had aroused the enthusiasm of Queen Victoria, was added to the arsenal of appropriate open air pursuits for women, alongside watercolour, astronomy and botany. Aiming somewhere between a scientific and a decorative approach, creating a "photogenic drawing" of leaves and flowers was often the first stage of initiation into a more complex and demanding technique.

Working with a view camera inevitably required more participation, whether transporting the laboratory to the surrounding countryside in search of picturesque landscapes or architecture to photograph, or presenting a scene from daily life recreated in broad daylight using a lengthy exposure.

As a tool for recording and idealising a way of life, photography renewed the feminine tradition of creating and decorating albums, at the same time as confirming the woman’s role as guardian of family memories. This role was also at work in the appropriation of portraits from magazines, which were exchanged, cut up and integrated into a painted or drawn setting, and then adapted to all sorts of fictional scenarios. But the raw art of photocollage was a pretext for social interchange in privileged social circles rather than a construct of identity, and remained, above all else, a means for these enthusiasts to distinguish themselves with their humour, sharp wit and irreverent approach to the microcosm of their own social milieu.

The French Professional

In Paris, as in several other large cities in France, Europe and America, professional women photographers were in evidence from the first years of the commercial development of this medium.

This sector very rapidly showed itself to be welcoming towards those women whose social situation required them to undertake laborious work. But the female workers were almost exclusively restricted to subsidiary or manual tasks - laboratory work, printing, touching up, mounting, colouring, etc. Only the wives or daughters of photographers could hope to escape from the anonymity associated with their role as perpetual assistant. Achieving the status of operator - that is, the noble profession of the practising photographer - not only required sufficient funds to purchase the equipment and to set up a studio in one's own name, but also required a taste for adventure, which was not the exclusive preserve of those who chose to travel. Moreover, the high risk of financial failure obliged female practitioners, widows or single women for the most part, to specialise in portraits of women and children, the reproduction of artworks and the decorative applications of photography. Satisfying the aesthetic and technical conventions of a highly competitive market was not enough, since they also had to guarantee respectability and neutrality in dealings that exposed them to the dangers of gender differences. Even if the concept of femininity was relative to one's social category, the profession could only in fact be practised decently away from the public sphere - which makes the rare photographs of architecture and other urban views, all the more special.

Women in Photographic Circles

One of the keys to understanding the national disparities in regard to the rise of the female amateur is to be found in the status accorded to potential female practitioners by the photographic community. The Photographic Society of London, whose patron was Prince Albert, announced explicitly, right from its foundation in 1853, that "ladies" were welcome as members. Following its lead, many of the societies that materialised around the country encouraged women to take part in highlights of the social calendar such as meetings, excursions and exhibitions. Places for exchanging technical information, news and also photographs, these structures encouraged many talented women to emulate and to flourish.

Faced with the most famous of these, the exhibition presents the first women members of the Société Française de Photographie. Typically, the first and only female amateur, Mme Leghait, was not French but Belgian; the third, Mme Laffon, was only accepted as a member 10 years after the Society was created in 1854. As its statutes reveal, it was as silent on the question of women as it was on the short-lived Heliographic Society founded in 1851, and the photographic community in France would long be characterised by an androcentrism that was totally accepted. This explains, to a great extent, the veil that even today is drawn over the output of French women amateur photographers of the 19th century.

The Theatre of Photography and the Theatre of Gender
Investing in the Intimate and the Feminine Experience

Before becoming an indication of preference, the predominance of images of women and children in the work of women photographers reflected their long confinement to the domestic context. Yet within such limitations, these photographers discovered an area of

expression unsuspected by men or inaccessible to them, ready to be explored through portraits or the narrative of a tableau vivant. From the late 1850s, when interior shots became technically easier, some women photographers began to distance themselves from the customary family and society subjects of the amateur. Another kind of photography was now possible, taking advantage of the opportunity to work away from the public eye, and exploiting the photographic possibilities of a more intimate setting with models.

Celebrating an ideal of beauty and the emotional ties between women, extolling maternal feelings, and, through this, the social role of mothers, capturing the charm of childhood - these were some of many motives at the heart of the artist photographer's strategy to gain recognition. These women were conscious of the ring of truth, the added emotion and the sensitivity that their experience conferred, in the mind of the viewer, on their photographs.

Femininity, a cultural and social construct, is always a performance, whether the photographer is a man or a woman, or whether the image was for public or clandestine viewing. But women photographers, with the complicity of the models, would have found in photography a way to reflect the myth and potentially deconstruct it. Was the point of view expressed, by definition, an alternative one? Was it necessarily different from that conveyed by the multisecular iconography controlled by men? Not only were these strong, thinking, independent figures, but also desiring bodies, sensually inaccessible. There are many photographs of women and children, which, falling into this latter category, today question the paradoxical, limited freedom accorded to those who took them simply because of their sexual identity, their status as a mother and the myth of feminine asexuality.

Embracing the difference between the sexes

Transposed into the area of gender differences, the issues of a feminine art of life drawing were determined more than ever from a male viewpoint. Whether a client, friend or husband, dressed or sometimes naked, the male model was photographed in the presence of a woman, who had the power to deliver, through him, her vision of virility. At a time when the best way to establish oneself as a portraitist was still to celebrate men - famous men if possible - standing in front of the lens, photographs of men were certainly not the most likely place to challenge the symbolic and social order of the patriarchy. But at the same time gender stereotypes clearly were being challenged.

The domestic sphere was not exclusively female. It was also claimed to praise paternity, to evoke intimate relationships - lovers and friends - between the sexes, and to depict, at times critically, the institution of marriage.

The public sphere was not destined to remaining exclusively masculine. Emancipation was on the march and was making its presence felt in the late 19th century even in a category of photographs, often self portraits, that could not be reduced to the level of a mere comment on femininity: transvestites and "new women" - smoking, drinking and riding bicycles - embodied, above all, and in a deceptively gentle way, the increasing challenge to traditional social roles and codes of behaviour and dress.

Furthermore the spirit of the times was conducive to the early incursions of women into the genre of the nude, impracticable then for women artists in the official circles of the fine arts. Praising the benefits of the open air under cover of a narrative or allegory, women photographers completely abolished voyeurism by exalting the body for itself, often desexualising it through a formalist or spiritual approach. This was the green light for women to take back control of the image of their bodies. And the feminine art of the human figure was now, above all else, a political issue.

Moving into Male Territories
The Street, the Elsewhere, Public and Political Life
At the end of the 19th century, a convergence of social and technological developments enabled the position of women in photography to be transformed. The emergence of the progressive Anglo-Saxon ideology of the "new woman" on the one hand, and the unexpected mobility resulting from the revolution of the snapshot on the other, encouraged photography to be considered as a means to subvert the conventions of the public sphere, and gradually to push back the boundaries imposed by the difference in the sexes.

This was the era of the first women photographers to travel the world, women who, over and above the diversity of their archaeological, ethnographic and touristic objectives, expressed in these images a freedom of body and spirit that came from being far away from their original social environment. There was also the rise of the illustrated press alongside an increase in women becoming professional photographers: more and more women, working in studios, and pioneering documentaries and photojournalism, were becoming involved, through their work, in issues of social and ethnic minorities, and issues of work, education and health. A tool that could go beyond psychological, social and cultural barriers, the camera served at times as a pass, an excuse to approach the “Other” on its own territory. More frequently than one might imagine today, it opened the way for photographic encounters that were inaccessible to male photographers.
With the same impetus that saw them take up the camera, and moving further down the road towards equality, women conquered, again through photography, the fields of military and political combat.
This was the time when they covered the struggle for women’s civil rights and the events of the Great War - a time when, through various forms of social commitment, the history of photography and the history of women joined forces.

Photography and The Suffragette Movement
"Deeds not words": the radical activism of the British suffragettes brought the question of visibility to the heart of the struggle for women’s right to vote. From 1907 onwards, photography became the preferred tool for a visual rhetoric designed to contradict the image of irrational extremists, disseminated then by almost all the illustrated press. Whether sympathisers or personally committed, there were many professional English women photographers who used their talent to serve the cause, whether producing portraits of its leaders as the respectable, composed women they were, or by immortalising the peaceful spectacle of legal demonstrations, historic parades and arts and craft fairs.

Targeting both the general and suffragette press, and disseminating their images through postcards, these photographs helped to saturate the media coverage and finance the organisations. By the time these women agreed to the truce imposed by the start of the First World War, the medium had enabled women, for the first time in their history, to control their public and political image.

Representing the War: the Front and the War Effort

Like all the wars that preceded it, the 1914-1918 war might simply have consolidated the traditional roles of the sexes: men mobilised for combat; women left behind to feed, dress and nurse them. It was, however, thanks to a long tradition of female philanthropy in the field of health, that we have the early photos taken at the front by women. Just like the amateur reportage that appeared at the end of the 19th century, several British nurses working for the Red Cross produced an unofficial version of the soldiers' daily lives, taken as close as was possible, to the reality of the fighting. Pioneers nonetheless, but also subject to the censorship laws, a few professional women photographers would be given special official status, either to document the mobilisation of the armies on English soil, or to provide photo reportage at the front for the American press.

Closing the last gap between subjects acceptable for male photographers and those for women reflected the general upheaval in relations between the sexes brought about by the First World War. Thousands of women, recruited as mechanics, munitions workers and train drivers had the opportunity, for the duration, to prove their ability to take on the responsibilities in sectors traditionally reserved for men. However, the general perception of their place in society when the war was over had not changed. Hence the vital concern, recognised in time by American and English women photographers and those who commissioned them, to highlight and record the lives of women workers at that time. Certainly the great majority of these women returned to the shadows of the home once peace was declared in 1919. But in the meantime, it was their war effort that had changed public opinion and won British women - those over 30 - the right to vote.

Images and other Stereotypes of the Woman Photographer

The woman photographer, when not held back by her innocence in technical matters, was handicapped by her elegance. Since Daguerre, this stereotyped image had prompted comment and inspired attempts to readdress the situation by inventors and industrialists, who were as keen to produce the democratic ideal associated with photography, as they were to "sell" the simplicity of their processes and cameras.

It was not until the era of the snapshot and the marketing of the first Kodak camera in 1888 that the medium truly began to be popular. Influenced by the international success of the "Kodak girl" launched by the American George Eastman in 1893, many manufacturers targeted their publicity campaigns at women, the traditional guardians of family memories, and now key figures at the forefront of a nascent consumerism.

An endless source of caricature, the feminisation, now on a grand scale, of amateur photography was often regarded as the victory of technical progress over feminine nature. Like the French photographer Louis Gastine in 1896, many men - and some women - were delighted to agree that, "through the considerable reduction in the weight and number of pieces of equipment, the ease and elegance of its use, and finally through the

invaluable simplification of laboratory operations (…), photography is now open to the most elegant and most delicate of women… and the least gifted in its use".