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SANDRINE FERRET IRONIC STEREOTYPES: DESCREET FEMINISM OF NATACHA LESUEUR¹



Natacha Lesueur is a French photographer whose art developed at the beginning of the 1990s. Her first works express a particular interest of the artist, who is staging a human body in bizarre situations in which food becomes decoration. By studying these images carefully, we notice the artist's inclination for playing with stereotypes, especially those concerning genders. A man and a woman are presented in paradoxical situations, and the outcome is both an appealing and disturbing combination. This article refers to two latest films by the artist, produced on the French Polynesia islands: *Omaï* (2012) and *Upa, Upa* (2013). The *Omaï* film is 3 min. 40 sec. long. A "paradise" lagoon with the horizon line accentuated by layered clouds is shown in a wide shot. A figure walks across the frame from left to right, and the whole is dominated by plain, red light. *Upa, Upa* is a 16 minutes 10 seconds long static take of a young Tahitian woman dancing in front of the camera to the sounds of traditional music, illuminated with a flickering light of a stroboscope. These two films question a conventional representation of the Polynesian landscape and its inhabitants, proposing a different view: bland colors, offbeat movements, anxious lights. The artist challenges the stereotype, uses a tool of subversion, making it possible to redefine its frames, which presents an opportunity to study feminist aspects of this work.

Since 1993, Natacha Lesueur has been taking photographs of fragments of the human body beautified with various patterns which are a result of varied techniques: decorated with food wreaths which morph into stockings, covered with unexplained² blush forming a reproduction of eye charts, but also adorned with imprinted geometric or floral patterns. These fragments – legs, a torso, a head – are taken in domestic interiors or are deliberately detached from any context through their narrow framing. Since the year 2000 Natacha Lesueur has preferred upper parts of the torso and the head. She realizes compositions inside the lips of the model, covering the teeth with corn kernels or white beans, and next she photographs them in a close-up, or she works with women's hair, suggesting headwear similar to culinary and decorative excesses of the royal kitchen. In choosing models for her works, a tendency to favor women is visible; however, some series are dedicated to male models, such as the one in which men wear sunglasses adorned with notes made from sugar, stirring both an appetite and anxiety. Another, newer series presents narrow frames filled with fragments of male faces stained with fruit sauce or confectionary cream. Initially analogue, the photographs are executed in the studio, and their smooth, precise texture references the high quality of fashion photography. Fragments of bodies are presented in a certain situation, referencing gender identity norms, violating them by a juxtaposition with a different stereotype, belonging to another domain: men wearing motorcycle helmets, whose visors are covered with confectionary notes³, such as "happy birthday" or "quarantine", and also women's heads seen from behind, covered with a careful composition of dishes merged with jelly, resembling a swimming cap. In this case, masculinity and femininity are expressed via the model's gender, but it disappears when the masculine is covered with too sweet sentences, or if the feminine reveals its double "competence": skin care and cooking are presented on a strictly decorative

image where even carefully arranged food puts us off, when we realize that it covers short hair of some anonymous head.

The works of Natacha Lesueur are unmistakably based on “clichés”. This term does not strictly concern photographic techniques, but it can also be used metaphorically in reference to social phenomena and from that point of view exploiting photography is not neutral for the artist, who intends to shake social and cultural categories through realization of photography, whose goal is to bare mechanisms of their development. [The artist] has always been pondering where social and cultural “clichés” come from and tries to discredit their role, in which we can notice discreet feminism that suits the statements of Judith Butler, who is in favor of systematic disqualification of categories for the sake of systematic subversions of identity⁴. This systematic disqualification allows drifting from social and cultural presentations prevailing in the sphere of defining identity. Therefore recognition of gender identity as female predesignates approval of the social and cultural luggage which governs this term, and accepting that an ontological form of womanhood exists, which governs the identity of the person described. Butler notices that the social and cultural luggage which refers to womanhood is marked by chauvinism, sustained for centuries, that is why it is impossible to characterize identity (male or female) with stereotypes of gender. It is similar in the case of the definition of social or cultural identity, where identification of a person through their cultural or social affiliation causes them to become burdened with a discourse created by values dominating the colonial war period or social fights. The reflection of Judith Butler resounds and finds its confirmation in the art created by Natacha Lesueur in Polynesia, especially the two films: *Omai* and *Upa, Upa*, in which she asks a question about gender in the representation of cultural minorities. Natacha Lesueur says⁵ that when she came there, she had a feeling she had known Tahiti – the landscapes

and its citizens are so similar to the postcards and photographs we see in advertisements or TV shows. It was a kind of déjà vu which gradually, through meetings and reading, fell apart, building a complex and elusive vision of the island. The artist recalls that she did not take any pictures as soon as she got to the island – first she took some tours, next she read some novels by great travelers from the 19th century, she familiarized herself with the history of the island only to start working, both on Tahiti, as well as after she returned to Paris. Natacha Lesueur creates her photographs with diligence, she makes sure that we recognize the stereotypes created by Western observers, a group she also belongs to, and who Tahitians use for the development of tourism. The exhibition *Ombres blanches*⁶ in which both films are presented, is dedicated to Tahitian exoticism: photographs of young Tahitian girls – “vahinés”, lush greenery and landscapes of paradise. However, even if the whole immediately recreates Polynesia, the images cause confusion: the landscapes enlarged to the size of a wall contain different perspectives – the half-covered greenery photographed in cold green light, the replicated Tahitian girls with a fake smile, and, especially, the bizarre colors suggestive of red or green.

The red dominating in *Omaï* references the light of the setting sun, a typical and unchanging tourist image of the Tahitian lagoon. But a figure cutting across the frame, walking from one end to another, disrupts that stillness, introduces a realistic dimension, which is confirmed by the soundtrack: the wind, the sea waves in the distance, the plopping of water caused by the movement of the figure, the crowing of roosters, the birds chirping and occasional human voices place the image in a particular moment. The framing is typical for a landscape, the sea and the sky are divided by the horizon elevated by the layers of clouds, while at the right side there is a palm tree in contre-jour⁷. The film's length overlays with the time needed

for the figure seen from afar to walk across the frame, a figure clearly Tahitian, with no shirt, walking on the small part of the terrain parallel to the horizon line, maybe planning to fish? Nothing explicitly confirms this assumption.

In *Upa, Upa*, a young Tahitian woman dressed in a traditional clothing, filmed in a static, seventeen-minutes long take dances to the sound of Tahitian drums. The rhythm is fast, and that feeling is strengthened by the stroboscope which, as the only source of light, alternately illuminates the dancer in the rhythm uncoordinated with music. The legendary smoothness of the Tahitian dance has been doubted by the rapid sequential split, in which the dancer is only seen in short, alternate, “almost motionless takes”. In this pale light a forced smile of the young vahiné is still thanks to the after-image effect.

In these two films, just like in all other works presented at the exhibition *Ombres blanches*⁸, Natacha Lesueur uses typically Tahitian references: vahiné, lagoon, lush plant life, which are representatives of Tahitian identity (created from it), frozen in time, which fix its nature and forbid any other kind of existence. So it may seem that the mutation of Tahitian society, just as the island’s landscapes, performed during each colonization since 16th century, has never happened. It could be said that nothing has disturbed this Edenic microcosmos. In this case we are close to the definition of gender given by Judith Butler: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within the compulsory frames, which gradually freeze, creating an impression of the substance, an impression of natural being of a kind.”⁹ The author ends the first chapter of her book with this statement, a chapter in which she untangles complex relations between the definitions of gender, identity and desire, in order to discuss the “natural” part, which would define womanhood ontologically through gender or the concept of gender, which would be its construct. The article is not aimed at a deeper analysis of this

thought, but only at showing that for Judith Butler the concept of gender defines a stereotypical construct, which in consequence “has achieved its goal” by defining the identity of the subject in a practically unquestionable, because treated as “normal”, way. There is no need to add that the concept, if it concerns the identity of a woman, may be used in regard to every constructed representation of identity, and the cultural minority identity is one of them.

Going back to the works of Natacha Lesueur, the fixed, forced smile of vahiné in the film *Upa, Upa*, the static lagoon from the film *Omaï* strengthen the impression of permanence of a stereotypical image. But the rapid rhythm of the stroboscope, the figure walking across the frame in the second film or the rewinding specific to the media implicate the idea of movement, which slightly disturbs the stereotype, questioning its adequacy at the same time. The syncopated dance, the atypical presence of the moving figure on the landscape, as well as common background sounds, refer piece by piece to another reality: a disco, a setting sun, a conversation, a henhouse, a nuclear test.

Natacha Lesueur realizes that by playing with many tones achieved with various kinds of lighting in the *Ombres blanches* exhibition, she tried to show how hard it is to capture nonhomogeneous, diverse Polynesia. The utilization of a film, rather unusual for her, is part of a desire to multiply a look at this part of the world. Polynesia is both a stereotype and an array of realities, including the fact that it used to serve as a training ground for the French army to perform nuclear tests for a few decades. There are few portrayals of this truth, a few published scientific reports describing its influence on the exotic territory. Natacha Lesueur decides to reference these facts by favoring lighting such as infrared, ultraviolet, stroboscope or prism filters which clearly are light remembrances of a shock wave, an offbeat flash that lights the folk dancer, the red ambience of the filmed landscape are many light signals, reminding us of an explosion and radiation.

Natacha Lesueur in an ironic way uses stereotypical portrayals of Tahiti. She mimics them, while, however, being aware that they cannot define identity, nationality or womanhood – a vahiné is a symbol of an imagined womanhood, fitting in the frames which are by themselves a phantasm – she builds them by means of introducing disruptive elements, which refer both to the colonial history of Polynesia, as well as male fantasy of the willing dancer in an offbeat light of a night club. A Tahitian stereotype – saturated with an idea of entertainment and escape – is overthrown by lighting, which at the same time references typically Western entertainment, and thoughtless destruction of a territory. An explicit and disdainful attitude towards consequences incurred by “others” dominates here, reveals itself in a stereotypical construction, which forces an image of the willing vahiné and the persistence of the exotic landscape, on which nuclear tests apparently had no effect. A heavenly vision promised in tourist pamphlets guarantees a tangible pleasure reserved for a tourist who decides to come, but influences heavily the Tahitian identity, which cannot overcome it and must submit to it due to being a part of the French Republic, thus hiding the cost of the nuclear tests, which were supported for decades. In *Omaï* and *Upa, Upa*, the Tahitian identity is not possible to be defined completely – while highly recognizable, it is riled by gloomy lightning. If this work does not reveal feminism expressed explicitly, it uses methodological tools in order to begin a process of deconstruction of the minorities’ identity representative of the French colonial history and what is left of it even today.

- 1 A collection of the artworks by the artist is available on the website: natachalesuer.com (author's note).
- 2 In fact, it is a mustard compress applied by the artist on the model's body, and as a result a redness appears (author's note).
- 3 „confectionary notes”, as I call them, are laconic sentences written with the help of sugar on baked goods, such as “happy birthday” (author's note).
- 4 Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990.
- 5 Quotations are taken from the catalogue of *Ombres blanches*, curators: Maurice Fréchuret and Sarah Ligner, Musée National Marc Chagall, Nice, 21.02 – 19.05.2014 (author's note).
- 6 White shadows (translator's note).
- 7 Contre-jour is a photographic technique, in which the camera is pointing directly towards a source of light, lighting an object from behind (translator's note).
- 8 *Ombres blanches*, curators: Maurice Fréchuret and Sarah Ligner, op. cit.
- 9 Judith Butler in: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990, page 33.

Sandrine Ferret

Ironic Banalities: the Discreet Feminism of Natacha Lesueur

Natacha Lesueur is a French photographer, who discreetly conforms with the feminist tendencies, starting from her earliest works realized in the 1990s. Her first photographs depict compositions, in which fragments of the body, the head, the bust, the legs, etc., are adorned with intricately composed pieces of food, sometimes creating mysterious alphabets. The colour photographs are exceptionally painstakingly processed – refined – and disorient the viewer with the vision of body fragments staged in weird situations.

On the exhibition entitled *White shadows*, in the Marc Chagall Museum in Nice in 2014, Natacha Lesueur presented a work realized during several trips to Tahiti. Moved by the similarity of the Tahitian landscapes to her own shots, she would ask herself a question, how to use visual means to depict the reality in which the women and men of Tahiti lived, the reality so distant from the postcards which we all see in front of our eyes. Her choice included adopting these schematic representations as a starting point, together with introducing elements of destruction connected with colonisation, and especially with nuclear tests. She also considered voluptuous looks cast at young Tahitian women (wahine) by the colonizers.

Playing with the Tahitian exoticism in an exaggerated way, undertaking strategic topics and perspectives (the landscape and wahine), Natacha Lesueur stages these subjects in order to introduce distortions into

their perception. The light of the stroboscope lamp or red lighting make the viewers embarrassed, as they also perceive typical pictures from the well-known categories: the paradise lagoon, the lewd native, light flashes or overly erotic dance. Lesueur's work criticises depictions of the Tahitian exoticism, with which it enters into a dispute, thus deconstructing it.

The article analyses in detail two video films, *Omaï and Upa Upa*, shown during the exhibition mentioned. At the same time it attempts to answer the question, in what way, while making use of special lighting in her work, Natacha Lesueur utilizes the feminist methodology, whose aim is to deconstruct identity.

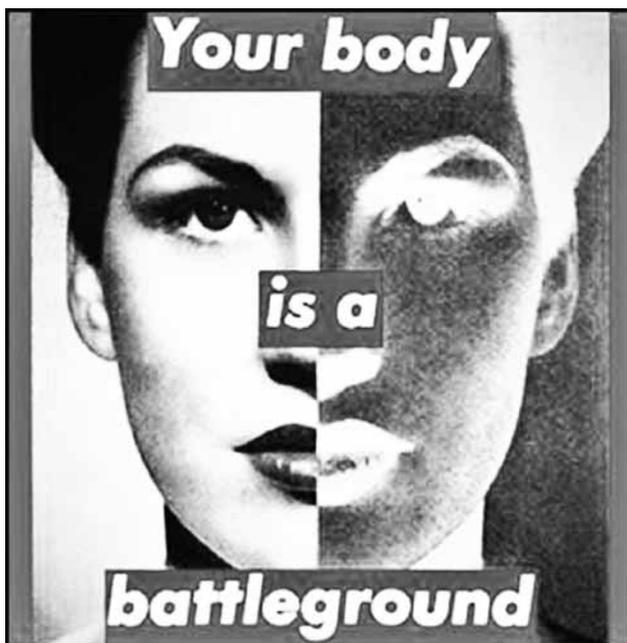
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Barbara Kruger, *Your body is a battleground*, 1983

Orlan, 7th plastic surgery – *Omnipresent*, 1993

