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What's new, Catrine Val? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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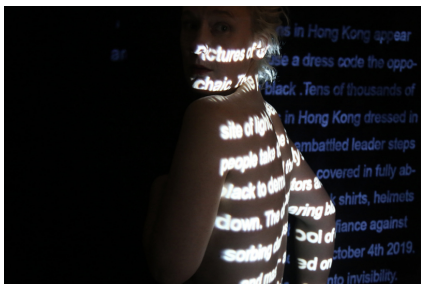
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Catrine Val (Cologne, Germany) is a pure powerhouse. Once you've met her, you'll never forget her. Her personality is one with her art. She is her art.

After a career in advertising in Vienna and assisting Valie Export and Bjørn Melhus during her studies, she embarked on her own career as an international conceptual artist, working in the fields of photography, film, and performance. With projects focusing on the role of women within diverse cultural and political systems, Val has collaborated with women in India, South America, Asia, and Europe, and often takes up popular etymology in her work.

In 2018, she was invited to the 24th World Congress of Philosophy held in Beijing. Shortly after that, Catrine Val was nominated as the recipient of the WMA Commission in Hong Kong, for her contribution on the 2019/2020 topic of "Light". While preparing her monumental exhibition in Hong Kong as well as openings for two exhibitions in Germany, the artist also found herself dealing with the impacts of the corona virus crisis.

This interview reflects her current mood, her past inspirations, and her thoughts on the future.

Thank you, Catrine, for taking the time to share them with us!

Nadine Dinter : Your photographic series *Feminist* was produced and published in 2013, and recently exhibited in 2019/2020. In those works, you dress up in various roles as different women. What inspired your idea?

Catrine Val : With *Feminist* I confronted the existential question – Who am I?

Thinking back on that time, it was a decade alive with the spirit of a young and vibrant Europe in full swing; boundaries were overcome. I chose to become a performer as a rebellion against the self-imposed constraints that limit our possibilities. I started out in the field of advertising. At my core, it's still a part of my handicraft and it illuminates the structures of my visual language.

But it seems to be falling apart now. Where is this spirit of optimism? The virus and the Trump phenomenon set our course towards dangerous and weak perspectives.

Back then, I wanted to assert my creativity and decided to move out of advertising to study art. The advertiser in me, however, kept silent. After postgraduate studies at the KHM (Academy of Media Arts Cologne), I started teaching straight away. I taught for six years at the University of Kassel where all my female students were my friends.

It was a very rich, creative environment at a time when I had yet to inscribe my own signature on the art world. When my contract with the university expired, the freedom was daunting. I asked myself: Who am I? Without any income, a quite unknown female artist, a woman – not a girl – and mother of three children, based in a sleepy province. Was I jobless or self-employed? The future was uncertain. Despite my fears, I decided to invent my own personas and make myself part of the seemingly exclusive art world. This became my project *Feminist*. I invented a new identity every day, like a daydream. It was the identity of fashion that brought the female body into the public eye. How much body is allowed? The terrain of the body is constantly changing.

With my projects I try to simulate my experiences from my past, polished world of advertising. I work with my own professional team of photographer, fashion designer, stylist, and make-up artist – intoxicated by all their fresh knowledge and the synergies on the set. The only deviation is me as a model at only 165 m and 65 kg! We are not allowed to age. In our modern society ageing is almost treated like a disgrace.

These days, our 40s are the new 20s. Only it isn't. Longings and desires shift and new challenges arise. Our thoughts reflect our longer personal history and life experience. Each day of our existence enriches the world a little bit more. New developments such as #MeToo, artificial intelligence, the ability to have their eggs frozen, cosmetic surgery, Snapchat – they all enable us to interpret our identity anew. Unfortunately, we do not have an unbiased view of our corporeal selves. For various reasons, both historical and emotional, our body is sometimes believed to be incomplete – a body minus clothes. Through the media, the body has become increasingly visible: "I believe in plastic surgery", said Andy Warhol already in the year 1975.

ND : We often see you in self-portraits, sometimes in disguise, dipped in surreal landscapes, bereft of time and space...

CV : Nothing is as spontaneous as it seems. The confusing, humorous and fragile nature, – what defines the combination of garments and settings, are more than a string of fortunes. My whole attention is dedicated to fabrics in the long tradition of fashion. Far from any snapshot, I define locations by the structure of their surfaces. Interplay of staged materiality such as concrete, granite, gardens, or the play with seasons. My love for solitude, all these images deal with the search for happiness. We live in a digital age in which the mobile phone has long become our second nature. The intimate and the public are strangely mixed in our constant companion, the smartphone, and offers a parallel representation of the self. Gradually one leaves the

territory of the freely unfolding daydream. In our everyday life, nature is shifting into the screen. As a calculated fusion, only then the person emerges. It has some autistic features: slipping into roles helps me to survive mentally Free to be who you are.

ND : Do you have certain idols whose work you admire such as Cindy Sherman, or Francesca Woodman?

CV: I highly admire those two artists! You might say that one thing we have in common is our attempt to engage with the principles of the male gaze and thereby deconstruct it. We also point to the ideology of consumption, fueled by mass media, to highlight the objectification of women's bodies and ourselves. I have always been interested in questioning the gap between appearance and the self – driven by the search for my own identity. I guess you could say that like Francesca Woodman's pictures, I'm always someone else – but double her age.

ND : Do you feel influenced by Valie Export, whom you assisted for a while? If so, in which ways?

CV : In the 1990s, "beauty" was a dirty word in the art world. It took me years to find my own vision. Shaken up on the inside, moving and raging on the outside. I wanted to show that I could be both a woman and an artist. This is still not self-evident. For four years I worked as a tutor in Valie Export's class and as her assistant. Her own struggle for recognition represents that of so many other female artists. She was shocked by the birth of my third child – she considered it a failure on my part. She had to make personal sacrifices but in terms of art she succeeded: Valie is one of the very few female artists who is present in most museum collections.

ND : What's the difference for you between working with yourself (for your self-portraits) and working with other models?

CV : I love to be behind my camera and I love working with people. For years, my works focused mainly on the role of women within different cultural and political systems. A central idea is the struggle between strength and authenticity. We can be light and playful, fearless and fragile, free just to be. We should express ourselves, wear what we want, play with being different, showing difference, different should be celebrated. We all should be far more fearless to break the rule of standardization, not afraid of highlighting the unknown. Emotions are a source of desire and a sinkhole at the same time, leading to grand and compelling activism.

Embracing cultures and blend all of their beliefs to form their own unique, multicultural environment. The rising issue of gender equality and body positivity is just the beginning. A dialogue is growing that transcends geography and connects the global north with the global south. It even rises above humanity and deals with equality between humans, animals, and things. The intensity of senses of shame varies not only

in history but in our contemporary society, where sameness is safeness; using something as simple as what we wear and how we wear it, we can draw attention to our differences in this world.

ND : You have worked with many women all over the world (India, South America, east Asia). How do you prepare those projects? How do you cast your models in foreign countries? Do you work with a local scout?

CV : Flying solo is not an option. For me, collaboration allows for new constellations and inspiration, and working with strangers opens up new and creative perspectives. All my protagonists represent a new generation of rebel. I approach them randomly on the streets, or meet them through word-of-mouth recommendations. Or I'm invited for conferences, festivals or other events where I take a closer look at the participants, thinkers and activists. I can't photograph a person I don't feel a personal connection with – otherwise the images will appear totally flat. We sacrifice millions of photos every day on the altars of social media. Now it's time to stand up. To stand out.

ND : Your Instagram posts are often accompanied by poetic phrases and metaphorical comments. What do you think about poetry?

CV : What appears on the surface as a merely mechanism of identity is a constant flow of inspiration. For the market, Instagram is a potent instrument of power: Peppered and blended to create fresh demands of desire. Once one is immersed in this enchanting world it is hard to tear oneself from it. What kind of world we live in is a fundamental question that most of us are asking? Not only since the outbreak of this corona virus the real, world is getting more and more a real counterfeit. In so far, I treat my Instagram like a butterfly. Or a sketchbook in which you can flip back and forth. Drained, cluttered, rescrubbed – a widely branching archive of personal memories from a women's perspective. Each click is an index of coordinates and an algorithm that feeds the soul. We are increasingly forgetting how to trust the wide radius of our eyes, our own memories. Sleepwalking in these constant odorless clicking. Filtered, we breathe in this virtual world like our own circulatory system. Paradoxically, we wish for more privacy. In the blink of an eye, it's over. Dreamland. I love these unspectacular moments of the present. There is this beauty about Instagram, the awakening of memories, falling out of place and time. Trying to mirror words with playful, calculated lightness in the same fragmentary aesthetic approach – maybe this is what gives an impression of poetry? I appreciate this immensely, as I trust words much more than photography. Though their rhythm I feel understood. These sketches of the written provide a playground for a universal language veiled in the world of hashtags – a constant overwhelming challenge. A poetic journey into the everyday. With our increasing intellectualisation, one has come to the conclusion that man can master all entity by calculation. According to the warning philosopher Max Weber, this resulted into the "demystification of the world".

ND : Who are your favorite writers?

CV : In the last few years, I've had the good fortune to work with many female philosophers, poets, and thinkers from all over the world. It is their love and devotion to language that has shaped, enriched, and inspired me. Everyone has their own talents and mine are definitely more anchored in visual language. I adore Maya Angelou, for example – her political activism shines brightly through her words and inspires action. And there's my own powerful Indian collaborator, Divya Dureja. Our powerful poetry film on sexuality and female sexual dysfunction got a lot of attention worldwide.

ND : You were recently awarded the WMA Commission in Hong Kong. Tell us a little bit more about this project.

CV : I'm so delighted about this precious grant! Despite the corona virus emergency, this morning I decided in consultation with the WMA team that I will go into voluntary quarantine and hopefully start my vision from there. For the project MANIFESTO, I want to spotlight female activists in Hong Kong demonstrations. Women have played a significant public role in the demonstrations. I will cooperate with the visionary philosopher Eva Man and her students. They will be my guides for exploring Chinese feminist thought. The goal of the project is to make the heavily mediated identity of the political crisis in Hong Kong more tangible. It will represent difficult and controversial ideas about the politics and emotions of the female experience. Observations of commodity fetishism meet gender politics. An interdisciplinary laboratory will be created.

As there seems to be no end to the Corona virus epidemic, these days I feel like I'm in the middle of a science fiction story. It's a standstill for the first time in our globalized world. This deceleration of life will dramatically change our view of the world. I'm already thinking about our post-virus comeback. We need creative solutions to the current challenges, which drive positive energy into the world around us. We need to fill the current cultural vacuum and demonstrate that we are still active, strong and thinking positively.

ND : In your statement, you write, "I believe that the art world is slowly warming to the idea that great artists can also be great women and mothers." What's your take on feminism in the art world? Do you feel that female artists are heard enough? Can intelligent content conquer sexy poses?

CV : My central idea is the battle for supremacy between authenticity and theatricality. We want a world where life is preserved and the quality of life is enriched for everybody, not only for the privileged. Synergies of colors – thinkers and dreamers. Art mirrors life and it is still a taboo to be both an artist and a mother. Some call us "rave mothers". My life as a mother parallels my work as an artist. If you are labeled an "emerging artist", you don't speak out. For years you work countless nights though, without complaining. Art is supposed to be an all-consuming enterprise; becoming a mother can kill your career like popping a soap bubble. I have had this experience a couple of times.

On the other hand, today women are encouraged to push the limits and ignore the inconveniences of their reproductive clock. Aging is no longer considered an absolute barrier to reproduction, as we move towards a future constituted by algorithms. Against the classical image of the family, I admire the individual concept of creating your own partnership. Happy and enriched with or without children. We all can learn from each other. The synthesis and the wide cacophony of cultures, ideas, thoughts, and beliefs can create a purpose that defines our future. Interested in hidden truth from the ordinary places that most of us pass by. Identity.

ND : The American art world has long been criticized by the feminist group, the Guerilla Girls. What do you think about them and do you think that the German Art Market could use such an initiative as well?

CV : Thank you, Nadine, This is such an urgent question! The canon of art history has been concerned with the issue of widescale abuse far too little. What we have is a mechanism of repression. For over 30 years, Guerilla Girls have been fighting against the discrimination of female artists, using humorous posters and performances as their weapons. They were the first to publicly denounce sexism in the art world. Only by acting anonymously could they avoid having their activism affect their career. Their influence is not that visible internationally, but the #MeToo debate has amplified their message. The question remains: Who is to blame for discrimination against women in the art world? The canon of western art history is wobbling. As museums are increasingly dependent on collectors' donations, the Guerilla Girls are not only giving rich white men the blame.

These actions are forcing big major collections to reconsider their investments. It is no less than the entire questioning of western art history. This includes thinking about the restitution of colonial looted goods to rectify historical injustice. Decolonization is much more than handing art back to country of origin. Especially in these uncertain and challenging times, there is an opportunity to introduce other invisible female voices into our modern visual culture. The turmoil of the post-capitalist world and the disruption caused by technological advancements pose new possibilities for all of us. Today we are witnessing a socio-political situation in which rights that have already been won must be re-examined, and women's issues are more pressing than ever. Now a picture can be considered discriminating against someone, and discussed nearly as fiercely as the climate change. We should all take responsibility, – against denying and concealing outrageous deeds. Maybe it would be worthwhile for German museums to show works by previously unknown female artists of the GDR, for example. This would challenge clichés about “free” Western art and “unfree” Eastern art. Particularly in times of xenophobia, it is important to hold on to art, for diversity and knowledge, to uphold values, and cultural exchange. After all, some of the most fundamental questions are: In what kind of a world do we want to live? And how can we work together to shape that world?

ND : What is your recommendation to aspiring young female photographers who want to enter the world of photography and make a living?

CV : In our performance-oriented society, we give the word success much too much space, thereby we can lose the most important vision: our passion and sensitivity. What is needed at this point is a renewed interest in humanity, culture, and identity. Art was never a democratic tool, and is most commonly related to financial wealth. My advice is to simply carry on, stubbornly and joyfully, take a long breath and believe in yourself, be full of endless curiosity and experience your life and the world in the here and now.

The internet is still in a pioneering phase and the new generation is formulating its own platforms. They are more independent than I ever could be. This generation advocates some very precious values created by humankind over thousands of years: social fairness and justice. These are the most important cornerstones of any civilization. And start collaborating! I have learned so much from young photographers. Explore the possibilities of digital networking if you are having an identity crisis. Work in and with the virtual possibilities.

The whole anxiety of not having stability in the future is definitely very present. You have to work very hard and have strong sense of self-belief – after that, everything will fall into a perfect frame. Unfortunately, there is no general rule of thumb on how to fund your life with and through art. Money represents the conventional idea of wealth. But this is shifting increasingly into the direction of sociocultural acknowledgment. Access to networks is the new worthwhile fortune. But no life path resembles the other. That is the beauty of art.

More at: <http://www.catrineval.com/>

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