



Pretty as a picture

Phototherapeutic workshop on women's image
Emilie Danchin & the WIELS, Centre of contemporary Art in Forest (Brussels downtown)

Learning French is obviously better tolerated than learning photography. Can photography be more than a sort of unspeakable entertainment?

○ *Can you please briefly describe who you are?*

I am a philosopher, an artist and a photographer and a therapist. I am based in Brussels. Since 2009, I carry phototherapeutic projects with diversified publics. This includes persons coping with serious social or mental instability. During these missions, I follow several objectives. Of course photography will come in the first place. However, I give a great place to imagination and introspection, by looking for memories, bringing existing pictures, using questionnaires. I also use drawing, metaphor and talking, in order to open a field of experimentation with multiple learning's. I have several targets in mind. Participants should optimally get access to their own resources. They should reinforce their sense that life is worth living! They learn photography of course, and they get an opportunity to give meaning to what they do and what they are. They create links, they sort out some of their emotions, they connect to inner life and get access to a symbolic level.

○ *How did the project Pretty as a picture start?*

It all came up from a group of 14 women of the Women's House in Forest. Forest is an area in the centre of Brussels downtown, a "poor" area of the city with "mixed" population ... All women coming from Morocco, aged between 18 and 60, all Muslim practitioners, almost all wearing the headscarf and are married and mothers. Most of them don't work. They can go out on their own, but they fear or avoid the presence of men! They meet weekly in the Women's House to learn French. This is where they said they wanted to learn photography because the WIELS, Centre of Contemporary Art in the same area, had already offered artistic workshops to them. While for me, I had been approaching the WIELS since several months... This is how it started!

○ *When the WIELS contacted you, why were you interested in carrying such a project with Muslims women?*

I had some pre-conceived ideas on their life situation because I meet them daily in the public transport. But it was the first time I got an opportunity to work with them. I was also personally challenged by the flood of images of women as objects in the public space, the trivialization of pornographic consumption, contrasting with the multiplication of women wearing scarves! On top of that, some men keep behaving in a deviant way towards women in the city. So when the WIELS called me, I was very enthusiast! And I took this as an opportunity to work on women, female identity through its image. Questioning women's identity through their images is a challenge, isn't it? Because we, women, are very often reduced to an image, aren't we? How can we see, look, show or simply evolve in life outside these images or not taking them into account? How can we combine more personal image and public image especially with Muslim women? What kind of images of women can we produce nowadays that have impact or inner strength? I was really curious to see how these women would take part in the project, knowing that the photos of the project were going to be exhibited at the WIELS in the end...

○ *How did you organise the workshop?*

It was a structured process, several steps we simply needed to follow. I accompanied them through photos, drawings, objects, stories and gestures of their lives ... It was very much alive! Many came regularly. They were curious, happy to participate and play. They were grateful for the work done although it looked a little bit strange. They didn't quite understand the scope, but they responded very naturally, without fear. We rummaged through the handbags to have a look at the photos on passport. We looked at hundreds of images of women produced by artists. We had a look at the photos the women did between the workshops. I guided them in a funny and imaged play about themselves using objects and memories of their lives. We could feel confidence, freedom, curiosity, a desire to learn. They have learned to describe feelings; elements of their personality, to name

emotions, to give them value and give them a place.

Through the workshops, they also discovered their own point of view looking at their own pictures, spread on the ground, during an editing session. There, it was beautiful. It generated a collective silence, astonishment! I could feel pride in the atmosphere. When leaving the workshop on that special day, "goodbyes" vibrated with moved smiles and bright eyes!!

○ *How did you feel? Wasn't too emotional in a way?*

I felt alternately I was a photographer, a therapist, a woman, sometimes a sort of militant ... It is true that during the sessions, emotions have become particularly important. For instance, one day, five women started crying looking at a photograph. This is mainly when violence or abuse popped up through an image or comments around an image. We had a picture of a woman hidden under a navy blue scarf was made. She is holding a mirror to somebody looking at her. Several women commented: "Before looking at me, look at you. Before talking about me, talk about you!" I was happy to try to give them access to emotions and symbols and they got involved, they were ready to make and remake the exercises. They were punctual and workshops often last longer than expected, which is rather unusual.

Through the workshops, tongues began to loosen and issues such as women's freedom were finally discussed, revealing stifled and fragile perspectives, naïve ideas, close to judgment, about Western women, between attraction and repulsion, envy and jealousy... Freedom, what does it mean actually? What does it imply basically? We discussed autonomy, responsibilities. Topics like abuse, violence mechanisms of control and manipulation, moral or physical harassment, fear and shame, were also discussed.

○ *How do you see your role in this context?*

My role was to provide them empowerment means at an artistic, social and human level. The subject matter Pretty as a picture was emotionally heavy at a personal and communal level. Very interesting issues could be questioned, that go far beyond the issue of headscarves, for instance law issues with private rights and pictures, freedom of expression and choice and action. Besides, identity and treatment of women through the images in the society have been addressed at the crossroads of two cultures. Looking at contemporary pictures, what if we had to choose between 2 images, one of a woman fully draped in a black burqa or another one of a nude scrawny fashion model? Luckily, there is flexibility between the extremes!

From the very beginning, women were aware that the pictures produced at the workshop were going to be shown to the public (exhibited and published). This is a point that they constantly kept in mind and that I constantly reminding to make sure that their choice and responsibilities remained theirs. This was the most important point. They had to decide what they wanted to show and how they would do it. This allowed them to play, create, experiment, and share the result They've put on a paper something personal, performed it in front of a camera and got photographed. They assessed the result and showed it to the public. This was all their choice!

○ *Why do you think it's beneficial to involve an artist in a social project? And why is it beneficial to the artist?*

Probably because of their creativity. Artists need to inject meaning to what they do. They bring special energy, enthusiasm, intensity, a way to look at the world, a way to meet and work with the participants ... And as far as I am concerned, my artistic research is a visual introspective and psychic search. It feeds my projects in a different way as if I was a pure documentary photographer or only a therapist. I care about underlying human sides in my projects. It fascinates me! And my projects turn to look rather human and the participants feel it and react to it. Some of them slightly change in the end, find a new job, start an artistic practise, follow a therapy, make new friend or start taking care of themselves. On the other hand, workshops are exceptional playing fields to experiment new way of making symbolic portraits. I enjoy going on materializing the border between conscious and unconscious, what is obvious, what is hidden...

○ *Do you have an anecdote or a striking moment to tell us?*

This is a tricky question because we have reached a great depth in the workshop under the seal of an implied confidentiality. When photographing them holding objects, it was very strong, but systematic in away. When stepping into memories, we really played together, elaborating something around an event and I could them connecting something inside themselves. They liked it very much. They said the picture with a souvenir was the best moment of the workshop. And all these scenes were beautiful to see because of their special value to them. I could see how they

related to the souvenir and underline it by making them repeat the scene.

When shooting, I saw a young woman plunging in sleep listening to the Koran prayers recited by another woman symbolizing his father. Another woman was putting her head on a woman's knees looking for her mother. An old woman performed her first departure to Europe with her husband. Her husband had died later on and she couldn't accompany the body to Morocco because her papers were not ready. When we made the picture, she wore make-up for the first time, she was very happy and brought a picture of the husband and showed to every one. Shooting them with their objects, I found myself talking with them lifting the veil. It was as if we were playing in a tent and it created a special complicity, a sort of secret and sacred room in which we strove to return the objects associated with emotions, bodily postures, stories ... They jumped from rock to rock, went back to the first day of school. They performed their drawings very seriously in the hope to have a symbolic picture of something of self-revealing importance.

One day, we were sitting in a circle; we giggled talking about our memories of strange men behaviours in public places. One after the other, we stood up and told an anecdote. It was hilarious even if we could read at the back of our eyes dismay, disgust. They laugh a lot. It is true that their activities in the Women's House is their weekly escape ... And if I noticed that there's no room for their anger yet, laughter is one of their remarkable resources.

During the workshop, I was impressed by that we, women, are educated under the myth of the Charming Prince and that it conditions the way we relate to existence and men. A drawing of a little girl receiving a cake from of her father is very telling, as if we had to expect what will feed us literally and figuratively from a man instead of being responsible for our lives. There is also confusion between love and put up with a dose of violence and control. " I like the shape of the heart because the heart sustains a lot, because I, a young woman, I am my heart, I can endure all problems," said one of the young girl holding a small candle shaped chocolate-blue heart . She delves into her emotions setting the object under the blue veil. An angel passes. "I'm very unhappy," she whispers. Relational issues need to be worked out. Making distinction between dominating and cooperative relations, autonomy and dependence. Some of these women are in a worrying situation. It's disquieting!

Is Pretty as picture an ongoing project?

Yes, Pretty as a picture is going on. I keep looking into new opportunities to repeat and develop it. It fulfils a need of self-expression of these women. Besides some social workers are happy to learn ways to welcome in a containing way heavy life pieces.

For the time being, groups are mostly composed of Moroccan women. I would like to mix women coming from different and contrasted socio and -cultural backgrounds to see what happens. Who said that being a woman is an easy thing?

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