

## **The *Ninfe* among us**

### **On Charles Haumont's photographs**

The photographs are deliberately large. Imposing. Each image allows the viewer to examine everything that is detailed in it, everything that becomes detailed under the very effect of this format. The grace of a gesture, the placement of a hand. A lock of hair, a look, a posture. Dissecting the banal becomes, by the same token, eventful.

Responding - not without a certain malice - to art's obsession with the preservation of the ephemeral, Charles Haumont proposes in this project a real examination of the fleeting. His photographs thus contribute to a fossilization of what, in essence, merely passes through. Or rather those that only pass through. Because, at heart, the photographer's work is all about studying the plural feminine, it is a meticulous analysis of the "insights" as Georges Didi-Huberman likes to call them.

When you look at them, you can't help but think of Baudelaire's passer-by: these women come from elsewhere, they go elsewhere. If, like the anonymous figure of the poet, these photographs refer to a contradictory image - haunting and elusive at the same time - they also and above all share a tension of another kind. An artistic tension. A temporal and historical tension. Baudelaire's passer-by is described by the poet as a fugitive sculpture. She is immortalized like this flowing movement which, however, exposes in its realization the immobility, the stature of a marble, the curve of a carved stone. The passer-by, with her thoughtless, instinctive, even banal movement - she is ultimately only crossing a street - deploys a posture that nevertheless seems maneuvered, sought-after, studied. A statuette. The woman - this image - continues then to carry other images, other representations that surround her and that she displays almost involuntarily, in her usual everyday gestures.

These images are equally those of ancient sarcophagi and Florentine paintings as well as of baroque sculptures. The passer-by causes the whole history of art to flutter around her. Each of Haumont's passers-by is similar, in this sense, to a *Ninfa*, in the Warburgian sense of the word. This figure, which does not identify with any concrete representation and whose rigorous iconography is difficult to establish, has never ceased to haunt the Renaissance representations that the art historian analyzed: it danced in a religious fresco by Ghirlandaio or found itself in Botticelli's Spring. For Warburg, the *Ninfa* is a figure in movement, a

fugitive. However, the *Ninfa* embodies such movement, surprisingly, through apparently secondary elements, simple accessories. A hair flying or a drape undulating. The ornamentation, until then considered as a flourish without interest, becomes the very place of a possible dynamic of the bodies. It is from the vibrant edges of the figures that Warburg places all the importance of detail and, by the same token, of ornaments and finery. In his work, Charles Haumont makes a similar gesture to that of the art historian, moving the classical theoretical questioning of figures to its periphery.

The photographer, like Warburg, seems to take ornament seriously by considering it precisely in its power as gesture. These photographs testify to a gesture; a gesture that must have been and is no longer. The act of dressing, preparing, adorning or arming oneself.

These photographs question the status of the ornament. Like the philosopher Georg Simmel, they raise the question of the limits of the human figure. It is because the adornment contradicts the geometric boundaries of the body that it constantly negotiates and renegotiates. Fashion, in this sense, in all its versatility, is the crucial place where the limits of being, its influence, its growth and ultimately its place are played out, where the limits of being are "undermined". The ornament constitutes the envelope - I would dare say the armor - enclosing the encounter of the tension between the intimacy of the being-for-self and the presentation of the being-for-others, as Simmel himself defined it.

These women are not necessarily prepared, in the most common sense of the word. But by embodying this contradiction of the thoughtless and the constructed, each of these *Ninfe* composes and negotiates their place in the midst of the crowd they are passing through. They walk, not seeing the lens or pretending not to see it. As John Berger once wrote: "One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. (...) she turns herself into (...) an object of vision: a sight."

Any appearance is thus necessarily constructed, but nevertheless remains spontaneous. The contradictory appearance of the passer-by is played out in the very fact that being looked at is immediately integrated, that the appearance is the very being of the female person and her art history. For better or for worse. Thus John Berger's reflections, which also haunt these

photographs, question more than ever the common destiny of the image and the *Ninfa* today. Charles Haumont reveals in this project, in our opinion, a true politics of the accessory: these images of the past, which constitute so many weapons and so many assets, prove that the place of gaze is always both a place of struggle and a place to play.

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