

**DARJA
BAJAGIĆ**

In **DARJA BAJAGIĆ'S** work, what you see is not what you get. An image—three women, roughly arranged on a dark background—seems fairly unremarkable at first. As you near it the title appears: *Matching Profiles Murdered & Murderer (Brittany Phillips and Amber Wright)*. Your feeling towards the image shifts from indifference to intrigue.

TEXT BY CHARLOTTE JANSEN



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOACHIM SCHULZ, COURTESY THE ARTIST, ROOM EAST AND CROY NIELSEN



Later, you Google the names and find that Brittany Phillips (the girl smiling on the left) was raped and strangled in 2004, aged 18. Her murder remains unsolved. Amber Wright, meanwhile, the solemn redhead on the right, was convicted aged 15 for the brutal murder of her ex-boyfriend Seath Jackson, also aged 15, following a Facebook spat in 2011. Suddenly what you notice in the image is a superfluity of hands—whose did what deed?

It's grisly stuff from deep in the darkness of a generation net-fed youth—and Darja Bajagić, who raised herself on porn channels, creating fake profiles from pre-adolescence, is familiar with this kind of information. But it's not the brutality or the desperation of

these crimes and sex acts, but the way that we consume them, that Bajagić puts in the foreground—not to discuss the morality of that consumption (she is already tired of talking about the controversial aspects surrounding her work and she doesn't engage with any questions I put forward that suggest conservative mores: for example, how would these women feel about their images being appropriated?) but she insists on re-creating the visceral reactions we have when we encounter images like these, particularly the most extreme.

In this way, Bajagić contributes a unique message to what is probably one of the most useful wider conversations we can have within contemporary culture nowadays:

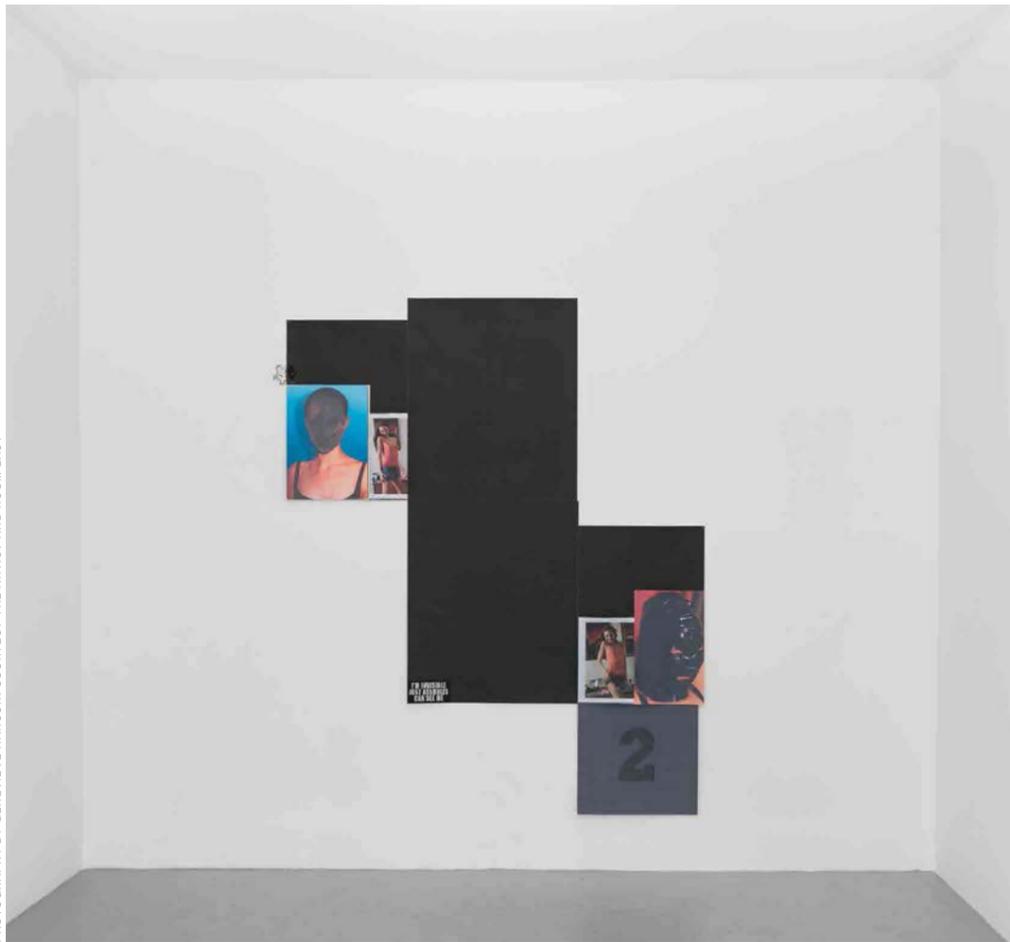
how do we read images? What do we feel when we view them? Where do these reactions come from, and can they ever be transformative?

In a language that mixes high-brow formalism (she studied art at Yale) and DIY messiness (reminiscent of early 2000s internet or amateur porn) her works seem to play a game of hide-and-seek: half-hidden, half-provocative. One thing that is apparent in talking to Bajagić is that she is a steely young woman, resilient enough to push such boundaries.

Could you talk a little about the recent show you had at Croy Nielsen Berlin, alongside Aleksander Hardashmakov?
I made a series of paintings, and two

sculptures: the paintings are large reproductions of collages that focused on two girls, Amy Fitzpatrick, a missing person, and Rachel Barber, a homicide victim. Most of the paintings focus on either Amy or Rachel, but one (*Hate Reports, Hate Handwriting, Hate School, Hate Teachers, Hate Snobby People, Hate SchoolWork, Hate House Music, Hate Keyboard, No Life, I Hate Myself*, 2015) uses both—a selfie of Amy and a friend, together with a journal entry written by Rachel's killer, Caroline Reed Robertson (in it, she lists things she hates, both of herself, and the world).

Images of, or relating to, Amy I collected off of her Facebook Community page, 'HELP US TO FIND AMY FITZPATRICK'. In it, there are



Previous spread, left
Softer Than Stone
And Sick in your Mind
2015
Installation view at Croy Nielsen, Berlin

Previous spread, right
Untitled Collage (Matching Profiles Murdered & Murderer (Brittany Phillips and Amber Wright))
2015

Left
I'm Invisible Only Assholes Can See Me
2014
Installation view from the show *C6ld c6m f6rt*

Opposite, left
Amy-Fitzpatrick
2015

Opposite, right
Playboy 43
2015



many photographs of Amy, including selfies of Amy and her friends. And those of Rachel I collected off of her memorial website, as well as online news articles. I target-searched images that were personal, of intimate moments, such as one of Rachel's parents seated, silent at their dining-room table, beneath a framed photograph of their daughter.

Other parts were sourced from message boards, horror-pornography and vampire magazines, and B horror film review magazines.

Why use those images?
How does this connect to your idea of presenting a 'blank' image?
By wishing to re-present images as 'blanks' (via new arrangements, contexts) I meant wishing for viewers to, at least momentar-

ily, suspend reflexive, fixed judgments, and allow different, new perspectives to arise—not, necessarily, that the images are 'blanks' in themselves. Obviously, there is a tension in this, as sourced images have a past, but it is this tension that I am ultimately after—a forceful reckoning.

This is where formalism lives, as the images waste away into abstraction—you see nothing, like a depression. You lose your moral compass. Nothing means anything. This quote (via PsychCentral), from a depressive woman of 21 years of age, describes it well: 'I feel like I'm floating under an endless gray sky in an endless gray sea of tepid water. There is no horizon. There is nothing to break the monotony. I feel nothing. I see nothing. I hear nothing. I can't bring myself to move.

My world is nothing.'

You said you're not interested in seeing women from a victimized perspective. So why use women in your work who are victims?
They are not always victims—only a few of the most present-day ones are, like the missing persons or homicide victims. (Rachel Barber's mother, Elizabeth Southall, wrote a book, *Perfect Victim*, telling of her family's experience, of Rachel's becoming 'another girl's "perfect" victim. Happy. Beautiful. Talented... (She had everything her killer could want.)

And although Amy and Rachel are victims of crimes, they are, also, not only this—they had multidimensional lives before they became victims. Of course, I was introduced to their stories because of their

victimhood, but I would not have guessed of their victimhood had I randomly encountered their portraits online. I use the images with the same thought in mind, that viewers will not know, until they know (via the descriptive titles), and this will ignite conflicting feelings.

What interests you about using pornography?
What is of interest to me is how it exists, as an alienated thing, hollowed out, drawing in meanings.

I use pornographic images because they ignite, simultaneously, desire and fear. They estrange, but, also, take possession. The same goes for 'violent' images—thinking stops, a new configuration takes its place, and it's pregnant with tensions.

It is not my aim that my works

be pawns in ethical, moral arguments, discussions. The works themselves don't want to communicate totally. They reveal only fragments, and are not ever fully formed. Also, pornography is only a fragment, too, of the other things present—it is not my focus in any way.

My approach is more 'I-simply-look-at-that-and-have-to-deal-with-it'.

Humour also seems to be an important, perhaps overlooked, element to what you do?
It is. It is Thalia and Melpomene. You can't laugh without weeping. An example is *Please Find My Amy*, 2015. Amy [Fitzpatrick] was 15 when she disappeared on New Year's Day, 2008, while on holiday. *Please Find My Amy* depicts Amy

with a friend, in selfies, found on her Facebook Community page. Amy is puckering her lips, and making a funny 'scary' face.

I'm attracted to sites of simultaneous pleasure and disgust—together, it is a powerful sensation. With pleasure, you're attracted; disgust brings you ambivalence, anxiety or excitement.

My impulse is, often, to use something disgusting, depressive, to embed sites of humour within, around, and, in this way, the conflict emerges; laughter turns it into something ridiculous. Redemptive, pathetic. Horror-pornography.

There's an element of craft in your work (zines, collage, patches).
What attracts you to these media?
I collect killers' drawings, [used] magazines and patches—these

things are lowbrow, maybe, and are beautiful, artful. They are connected to places, times—arrive with their own histories, meanings.

Collage is how I usually work, as it allows for these fragments to be put together, repositioned to create new meanings, in a new 'dead' body.

And what draws me to minimalism is its sterility, yes—it is clean and dead, and I mean dead in a positive way. It is 'nothing', and you are afforded to think 'nothing' in its sight. Your sensitivity to 'everything', then, is heightened—you perceive details you otherwise wouldn't have, because there is, together, nothing to see and everything to see.

So, I put them together.
Darja Bajagić has a show at New Galerie, Paris, until 19 December.

DARJA BAJAGIĆ

WHERE'S YOUR APPETITE?

by Franklin Melendez

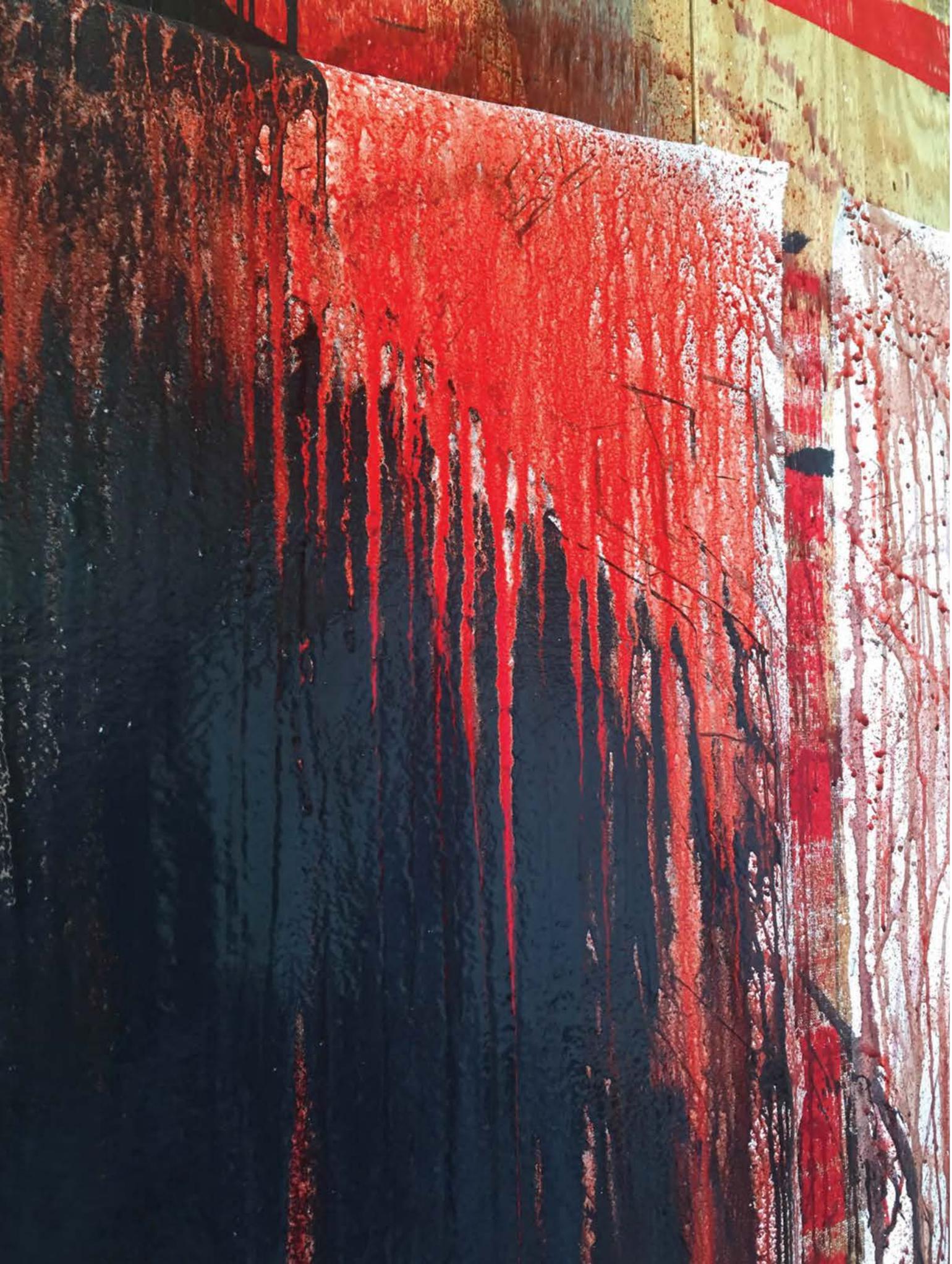
Follow the links long enough and things are bound to get weird. Darja Bajagić knows this well – in fact, that might be how she stumbled onto the website, ‘maniacnanny.com’, though at this point who can really say? You can visit it if you like. Click and be greeted by a nicely legible header in a cheerful shade of pink – it boasts “The Best Serial Killers, The Best Gore, The Best Crime Scene Photos.” True to the billing the site scrolls down to reveal a hearty assortment of real-life carnage – crime photos (contemporary and historical), police mug shots, murder scene documentation, victim forensics and so forth. Each image is carefully indexed with an extensive catalog of tags (‘spree killing’, ‘racist’, ‘perverted sex practices’, and so on and so forth). Interspersed among some of the entries are long blocks of texts all in caps – detailed accounts of gruesome acts that unexpectedly morph into descriptions of foods being craved by the editor at that particular moment in time.

Depending on your temperament, Maniac Nanny’s tasty idiosyncrasies will likely elicit a queasy mixture of fascination and revulsion, together with an indescribable something else. Therein lies the rub for Bajagić, whose practice has always been attuned to those impulses that lurk at the fringes. Niche porn, fetish sites, murderabilia outlets and its neighboring nether regions have provided prime fodder for a widely varied output that to date encompasses zines, collages, videos, sculptures

and assemblages of painted and printed canvas that stand in for paintings.

In all of these, the specter of violence hovers diffusely yet is omnipresent. At times, it can be coyly suggestive as in the mall Goth motifs that punctuate many of the compositions (*Untitled Collage (goths have more fun ...)*, 2015). At others, it hones in on more specialized fare, such as a group of hatchets printed with images lifted from a women-with-weapons fetish site – the resulting customized mementos implicating the viewer in all the fun (*Ex Axes - Sword*, 2015). Even darker still, there are the stage blood splatters on *Untitled Collage (Blutengel ft. Cathy Torrez)*, 2015, whose cryptic title, when subjected to a simple Google search, yields up its tragic real-life tale; then, there’s the crudely rendered pin-up drawing preserved in a plastic sleeve embedded in a framed collage (*Dacha: Robert Bardo 8x11 ink drawing of porn star ‘Gauge’*, 2014). Follow the clues and you’ll discover its origins in a controversial e-commerce site specializing in art keepsakes from killers on death row.

Neither sensationalist nor banal (or perhaps a little both?), these images have been described by Bajagić as ‘blanks.’ This is clearly not some claim to neutrality, for each is voluptuously laden with its own content and history. Perhaps she is simply acknowledging her own predilections: a willingness to leave things undigested, vulnerable and open to their own missed connections and random encounters.





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It's a dangerous game to be sure – stripped of parameters, reliant on contingency

and staunchly resistant to the usual art historical points of orientation. Bataille, Oleg Kulik, Carol Clover, Laibach, Thomas Hirschhorn (to name just a few) are all equivalents in a field littered with fan art, clippings from gore-enthusiast mags, *Hel-Iraiser* memorabilia... I could go on. Far from a fixed endpoint, each fragment hovers before you as a volatile link, a seductive lure into the murky terrain where hidden fantasies and unspoken desires bleed into things still inchoate and unnamed. Seasoned surfers of porn will be familiar with that sensation: a curious click inadvertently eliciting endless pop-ups – windows upon windows, beckoning onto pleasures untold. There's a thrill, followed by instinctual fear – perhaps for uncovering personal cravings once thought unimaginable.

For this reason, Bajagić might be less interested in the accountability of images than the driving need to make them so. It is a philosophical questioning undertaken as intimate work, poetic and awkward for all its

proximity. The recent video, *Amazing girls.*

With wonderful personalities. There saints. Talk to them about life. Love. Politics., 2015, speaks to this with a series of short interviews conducted at the now-defunct Chicago goth club, Neo. Each snippet is structured by four brief questions: 'what did you eat today?', 'What is a happy story?', 'What is a sad/scary story?', 'Parting words?'

The answers range from the mundane (cereal for dinner, a fortune cookie, orange chicken a bit dry) to the humorous (my rescue cat got fat) to the poignant (long distance partings, self inflicted wounds, a parent's death). It is an odd mix that never congeals into a single confessional, but rather lingers as morsels of information left unresolved. In that sense, this is never satisfying – perhaps in the same way that cereal for dinner can never be satisfying, even if it's sustenance for the world we inhabit. There's a small kind of pleasure to be derived from that knowledge, but one – as Bajagić aptly notes – you might be a little ashamed to admit to yourself.

MOUSSE



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DP

Yes, and the sound piece you did at Yale Union seemed like it also engaged with some of these important issues, but in a different way. **PM**

The piece is called *Files*. Alex Fleming and I made it and Anthony Tran wrote the software, which, in addition to animating and structuring the piece, logged every file played in sequence on Yale Union's website during the entire exhibition. Samples were played as a Markov chain changed states. A Markov chain is the formative math behind many needs for calculating probability, how often a state will change: a kind of pre-existent form letter that affects policy and business as it applies to people's lives—search engines and life insurance policy risk assessments, among them. Momo Ishiguro produced sub beats which played simultaneous to samples

of audio from robot nurse youtube videos, phone sex recordings, and a large composite text read by Vanessa Place and Tom Blood about abuse in adult residential homes, mentally ill prisoners, and the physical properties of loading dock rubber bumpers.

DP

Have you found art to be the best way to approach these extremely complex and significant issues? Can I ask finally, what do you ideally hope to accomplish with your practice? **PM**

Yes, I believe in art's and artists' capacities to approach these issues. And more than approach them, I believe in their capacity to understand them and show how they work, which includes showing what metaphors they rely on. I hope to accomplish not only an art practice.

by Daniel S. Palmer

LIVING YOUR UNLIVED LIFE

The work of Darja Bajagić recontextualizes saucy images seen as stereotypes by Western eyes—the clever Slavic fox, the Russian web-matched wife—granting them a sort of liberating ambiguity. In this conversation with Natalia Sielewicz she talks about her work, Agamben and porn.

As she recalls in a recent interview, artist Darja Bajagić – who recently graduated from Yale's MFA painting program – once had a meeting with Robert Storr, Dean of the Yale School of Art: “he literally told me I was crazy and that Yale would pay for all of my counseling and therapy during a leave of absence to seek help for my obsessive-compulsive behavioral habits of collecting images of girls and porn.” Bajagic's practice is indeed concerned with the ways in which female sexuality is depicted and its various means of web-based distribution. By incorporating pornographic imagery her works address current issues such as power struggles between the sexes, censorship, authorship, and the digital landscape. Bajagic was born in Montenegro and emigrated to the US; she is fascinated with notions of concealment and misdirection, and with the forms in which taboo content is privatized and made accessible on the internet.

Darja Bajagić

NATALIA SIELEWICZ Before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall subversive affirmation and over-identification were at the forefront of neo-avant-garde practices in Eastern Europe, among artists who sought resistance through apparent appropriation of prevailing ideologies. I am thinking in particular about the Slovenian group Laibach and Moscow Conceptualism employing the totalitarian aesthetic, or Oleg Kulik performing the stereotypes of the Eastern European Other in *I Bite America and America Bites Me*. In your work you appropriate sexual imagery found online and meticulously arrange it in formal compositions. In the past you also constructed various identities and started relationships with men on social media using the likenesses of sexy Eastern European women. Do you believe that porn can be a vehicle for subversion and transgression?

DARJA BAJAGIĆ

I love Laibach—one of my favorite t-shirts (and images) is theirs, and it reads: “Freedom of Speech Go to Hell!” And, yes, in the past, as a pre-teenager, I was collecting images—both pornographic and not—of girls on the Internet to use as aliases on various social networking websites. This was not an art project—I was just socially awkward. I do believe that pornography can be and is a vehicle for subversion and transgression. Its power rests in its contemporary, neutralized state or in its potential to be so: inoperative, deactivated in its “old” or “original” use, and unrestricted to “new” or “translated” uses.

The surface reading of a pornographic image (or anything, really) is not efficient. There is more to see (or never to see) than one sees, usually. Consider this: 1) “a girl is sitting on a bed, simultaneously rubbing herself, and reading a book,” versus 2) “a girl is sitting on a bed, simultaneously rubbing herself, and reading *The Fermata* by Nicholson Baker” (see *Sample XXX Puzzle--Pin-up Land™ Cum-centration*, 2013 at 6'20”). Noticing the book opens up your view of the image. This is liberating. The image is desexualized, neutralized at once.

This neutralization is primary.

I have been influenced by Agamben. My favorite parts are his dissections of Chloë des Lysses in *Profanations*, considering pornography as a place that allows for the overcoming of all social sep-



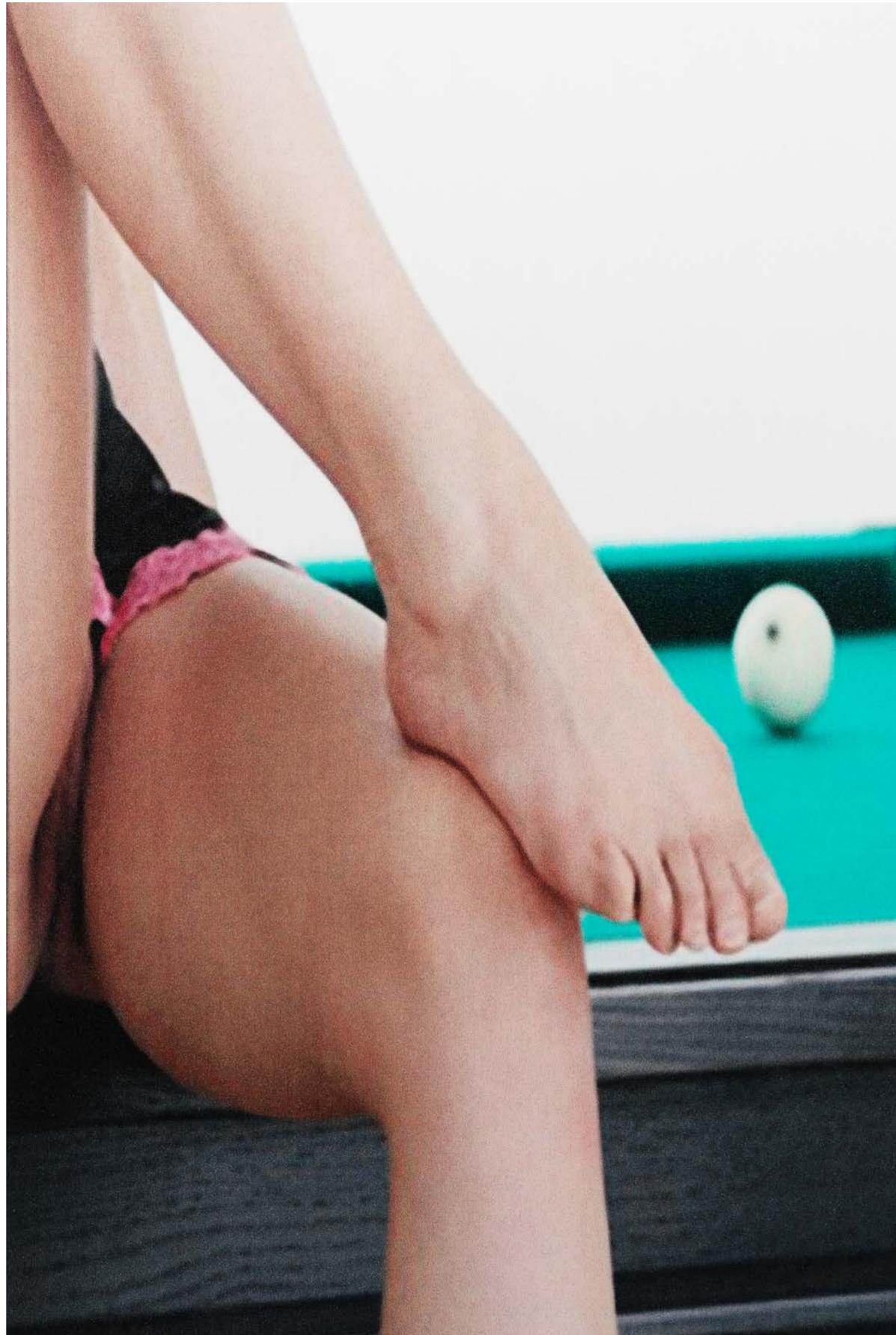
arations, not as a global phenomenon to be castigated or praised, censored or saved. **NS**

Since you brought up Agamben, let's talk about the ethics of appropriation. The women depicted in your canvases stare back at the viewer with penetrating judgement and confidence rather than vulnerability, as if they do not intend to comply with spectators and their desire. Is this example of an indifferent expression a decisive factor in your selection process of images? **DB**

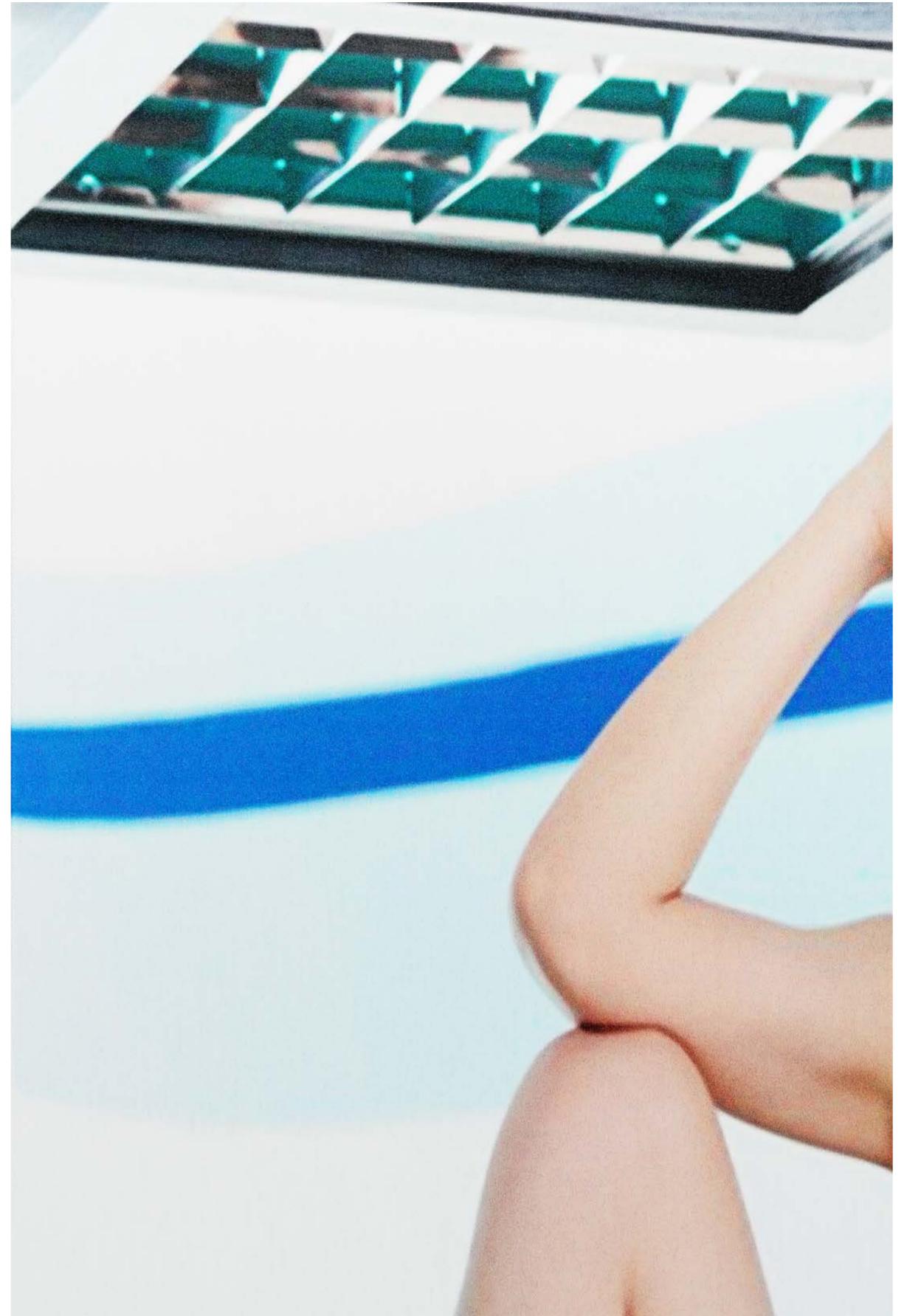
Yes. I often reread Agamben's texts, especially those on Chloë des Lysses. He writes of her display of indifference, her inexpressivity, rendering inoperative the apparatus of pornography: her face, thus, appears as a “pure means.” (My favorite photograph of her is one in which she is petting a cat and being anally penetrated at the same time.)



Above - “Ex Axes” 2015
Opposite - *Sample XXX Puzzle-- Pin-up Land™ Cum-centration* (still), 2013



Thumbnail 11, 2012



Thumbnail 7, 2012



The gaze of the girls in most of my images, staring back at the viewer, is also liberating. It is an entryway of a different sort into the image. Albeit briefly, it deactivates the event, the subject, and activates a new perspective. It is almost like a new life, really. I also like to think of it as saying: “The joke’s on you.”

NS
Speaking of recontextualization and deactivation of the imagery you encounter online and later use in your work, it made me think of the text “Further Materials Toward the Theory of a Hot Babe” by Hannah Black, where she describes the Babe as “the embodiment of the flatness and emptiness of the image,” almost a traceless non-subjectivity. Could you talk about the flatness of the images you use and the flatness of your paintings as framing devices?

DB
The flatness of my images rests on the belief that they will mean something else than—or in addition to—what they appear to mean: “pure, profane, free” (Agamben). Their deactivation occurs through a recontextualization as things on mostly monochrome backgrounds, leveling panels of canvas. I am led by the designs of Internet, magazine pages—display methods that generate particular seriality, understandings. Then I think about what would happen if the texts were emptied from those pages, or if they were subtly replaced by other texts, filled with misspellings perhaps, or incorrect translations. **NS**

Considering being lost in translation, there is an interesting case to be made about the particular socio-political and geographic context where we were born (Poland, Montenegro) in relation to import/export of porn from the region. I am talking here about the political backlash in former socialist states who entered free market in the nineties, having to deal with old traditionalist values on the one hand and the new social order of Turbocapitalism on the other. What I find interesting about your work is how it humorously infantilizes the Western fantasy surrounding Eastern European sexuality and desire—the wild Slavic vixen ready for all with her exuberant *jouissance*, the Russian mail-order bride, charming as long as she doesn’t bite back. I wonder if we can perceive your approach as a strategy that destabilizes or frustrates the Western male gaze? Could you elaborate on how it manifests itself in your work and perhaps why this is important to you in relation to Montenegro? **DB**

I do not dwell on conceptions of the “male” gaze, but on the “Western” gaze, perhaps. Though I was born in Montenegro, I have a distant, strange relationship to that place, since I have not spent more than a single year there, all told. It was through ephemera and individuals that I became connected. So it is safe to say that my own gaze is a combination of both East and West.

I distinctly recall an event to which I could perhaps attribute the beginning of my real fascination with the East: meeting several beautiful Balkan girls in a girls’ bathroom, in ninth grade, who were shocked to hear that I was not aware of any of their favorite “turbo-folk” singers (such as Ceca Ražnatovic’, for example).

I was only able to caricaturize things from the homeland, mostly via Internet, confirming or disproving my fantasies with my mother.

In my own practice, those caricatures of the wild, Slavic vixen, and the Russian mail-order bride are presented as simultaneously false and true: it is this teetering that destabilizes and frustrates, since it is ultimately unfulfilling; it is available and there, but it is also neither of those things. An example is *Untitled (УМЕТОСТ НЕ ЗНА ЗА ГАРАНЦИЈЕ (ART does not know WARRANTY))*, 2014, (included in “Private Settings” at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw): one of the images in the painting is a headshot of a well-circulated yet nonexistent Russian mail-order bride—one of the girls outed on the very helpful, informative Russian Detective website.

The existence of this possibility of a dual reading is vital. There is never a single perspective anyway. **NS**

We live in an era of radical self-expression, an attention economy in which we continuously obliterate the lines between act and authenticity. Browsing your Twitter account I noticed posts where you declare “Don’t call me babe, call me bitch” or “Angel by Day, Devil by Nighth” (sic). They

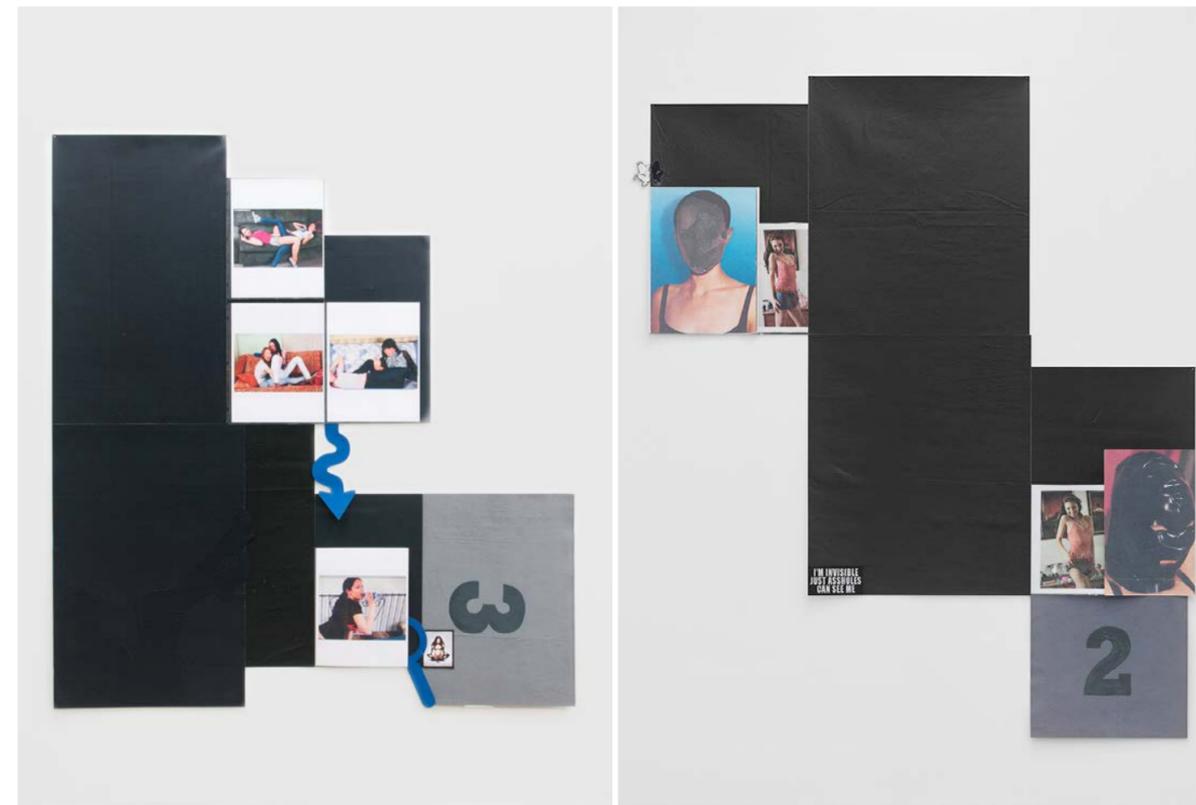
made me think of the provocative titles of your works, such as *How Badly Do You Want To See Me Hold My Pigtailed Up?* What is the relationship between language and self-design in your work and your online persona? **DB**

I use Twitter for found sentences, words, and images (a conservative estimate would be that 80% of my tweets are sourced from elsewhere) that are usually representative of current themes. I do not necessarily think of my account as embodying a persona, though if I did, it would embody the persona of one of the girls in my images, or their collective identity.

A lot of my titles reflect my Twitter posts: “Angel By Day, Devil By Nighth” was taken from a misspelled iron-on patch I purchased online, and now it is also the title of a painting. The patch itself was included in the painting, too. (Other titles come from the filenames of images included in works, as they were found.) Text patches in the paintings read: “I’m Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me,” or “Enjoy Me I May Never Pass This Way Again.” I find it humorous to imagine the paintings as being the personified narrators of those lines, or the lines as new mottos for the girls, with the patches stuck next to them. Then there is the dry, cringing “Thanks For Looking”—is it sarcastic or sincere?

You are not sure whether to laugh or to cry.

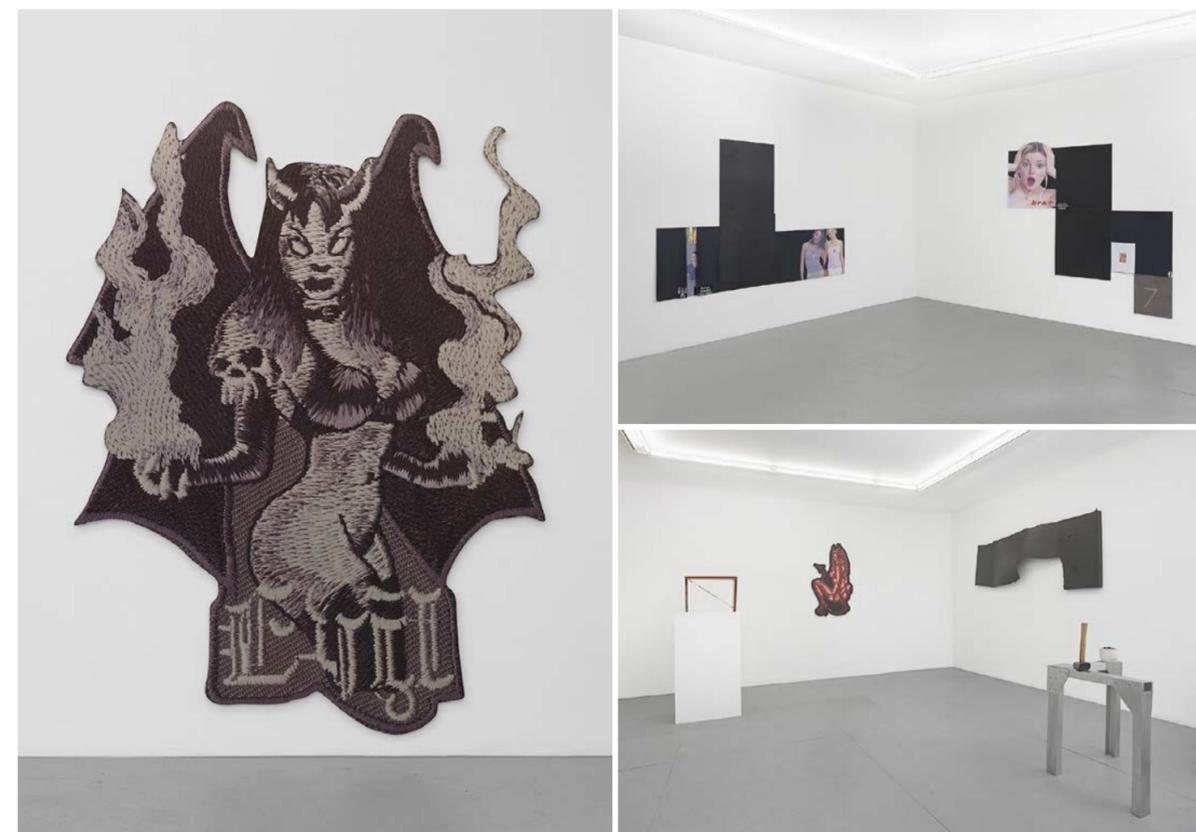
by Natalia Sielewicz



Left - *Untitled (JeansLesbians)*, 2014

Right - *I'm Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me*, 2014

All images - Courtesy: the artist and Room East, New York



Left - *Evil*, 2014

Right, Top - “C6ld c6mf6rt” installation view at Room East, New York, 2014

Right, Bottom - “Abnormcore” installation views at Room East, New York, 2014

di **Daniel S. Palmer**

Il lavoro di Park McArthur spinge a un cambiamento i sistemi che considerano la presenza di individui con disabilità un mero atto di accoglienza. Il tema dell'accesso e le tensioni insite nella sua possibilità sono il fulcro della sua produzione e al centro di questa intervista con Daniel S. Palmer che ha preso la forma di uno scambio scritto durato qualche settimana.

DANIEL S. PALMER Puoi parlarci del lavoro che hai fatto negli ultimi anni e, più in generale, di cosa ti spinge a essere un’artista?

PARK MCARTHUR Realizzo sculture, a volte accompagnate da suono o video. Scrivo di argomenti come la dipendenza e l'autonomia. Il mio lavoro si avvale delle metodologie della critica e assume forme riconoscibili. In sostanza, però, rimanda a un livello più profondo di quello formale e critico, un luogo di abbondanza e d’amore, cosa che credo sia piuttosto comune agli artisti. Mi sento una persona sensibile. Una volta, ad esempio, un insegnante ha definito i segni verticali di Barnett Newman, i cosiddetti “zip”, figure dritte e attive su uno sfondo che arretra. Gli zip, ha spiegato, parlano all’esperienza di essere umani. Ascoltando quell’analisi mi è venuta voglia di fare arte. Sentivo che l’insegnante si sbagliava. Non tanto sugli zip di Newman e la loro eco metaforica, quanto sul nostro essere umani e su come riconosciamo e caratterizziamo ciò che questo significa.

DP Hai anche partecipato al Whitney Independent Study Program e recentemente hai ultimato delle *residency* da Skowhegan, all’Abrons Arts Center e da Recess, ciascuna delle quali sembra aver avuto una sua dinamica. Pensi che queste esperienze abbiano influenzato il tuo lavoro?

PM Sono posti molto diversi, con visioni e missioni diverse. Ogni soggiorno mi ha aiutata a capire meglio che per me, per creare arte, sospendere la vita quotidiana non funziona. Nei ritmi quotidiani della mia vita riesco ad andare più a fondo, a pensare e a sentire più in profondità... Il mio lavoro ha origine dal luogo in cui vivo. È da lì che imparo.

DP Eppure hai lavorato sullo stato dei luoghi incontrati durante le residenze d’artista presso queste istituzioni. Le diverse situazioni hanno avuto effetti sul tuo modo di guardare alla vita quotidiana e di creare arte?

PM Non so se creo arte “sulle condizioni” dei luoghi e delle organizzazioni, ma lavoro *con* o *tramite* le condizioni presenti. *Gate*, del 2014, fa parte del recinto metallico che circonda il giardino dell’Abrons Art Center: conduce agli atelier degli artisti e all’ascensore. Il personale dell’Abrons ha contribuito a rendere il cancello accessibile e sicuro. Alla fine, però, i vari tentativi di prova si sono interrotti e io continuo ad accedere alla struttura con l’aiuto del personale di manutenzione del centro. Meredith James, un’artista che ho conosciuto all’Abrons, ha proposto di mostrarmi quant’è facile scavalcare il recinto attaccato a *Gate*, così ho disegnato tutte le sue mosse. Ho usato una pianta dell’Abrons dell’architetto Lo Yi Chan. La posizione del cancello era segnata sull’elenco delle opere con il titolo *Gate*. Quindi il cancello si trova fuori dalla struttura, mentre alla mostra c’è il suo disegno con le istruzioni per scavalcarlo e tutti gli interventi che il personale e io abbiamo fatto, insieme e separatamente, nell’arco di un anno. All’inizio del soggiorno non sapevo né

pensavo di fare niente del genere. Spesso il lavoro scaturisce dalla necessità.

DP La tua mostra “Ramps” del 2014 alla galleria Essex Street è stata molto efficace. Come hai realizzato questo corpus di opere e come credi sia stato recepito?

PM Le costruzioni edilizie come realtà perpetue nella New York di Bloomberg e del dopo Bloomberg bloccano di continuo i marciapiedi. Nei punti in cui questi s’interrompono bruscamente, le imprese edili ingaggiate dal comune piazzano delle rampe, che possono essere grandi assi di legno fissate a terra o riempimenti di asfalto pressato. La mostra “Ramps” è nata dall’idea di usare le rampe di tre o quattro cantieri edili. E aggiungerne altre quando, e se, fossero state sostituite. In tal modo si accumulavano nella galleria nel corso della mostra. Le rampe rimuovevano l’accesso e richiedevano che questa particolare forma di accesso (la rampa) venisse riprodotta tramite l’interruzione del piccolo ecosistema di ogni cantiere prescelto. Una è stata inclusa nell’ultima presentazione della mostra. Proveniva da un cantiere all’angolo sud-occidentale di Cooper Union. Il direttore del cantiere, John, me l’ha portata allo studio dell’Abrons Art Center dopo una chiacchierata su quanto succede in genere alle rampe: vengono gettate via o riutilizzate.

Mi ha sorpreso l’accoglienza positiva della mostra. La recensione di Peter Plagens per il *Wall Street Journal* diceva: “come dichiarazione di protesta sociale, la mostra è priva di fervore”, che per me si traduce in: l’opera riesce a fare ciò che si ripromette di fare, fa quello che dice di fare? Un’ottima domanda.

DP E tu cosa pensi? Cosa speravi che facesse?

PM Speravo che avrebbe conseguito più obiettivi. Volevo mostrare la tensione insita nella possibilità dell’accesso, volevo far capire che la standardizzazione di istruzione, infrastrutture e sanità accessibili deve rivolgersi a individui con esigenze molto diverse. È una conformazione concettuale, architettonica, spaziale ed economica che dubita delle reali opportunità offerte dalla legge antidiscriminazione. Volevo che questi temi rasentassero la metodologia estetica: come si mostra il funzionamento di una cosa per metterla a frutto? E volevo contestare l’ecceZIONismo dei temi della mostra ricollegandoli al lavoro di scrittori, artisti e attivisti (come Marta Russell, della quale c’era il link alla pagina di Wikipedia sul muro) che fondano l’accesso e la cura nella trasformazione e redistribuzione economica. Sono questi i contenuti e i temi metodologici della mostra. Come essi si rapportano a quanto fa una mostra quando chiude è l’interrogativo per il lavoro futuro: l’esposizione di questi oggetti e la loro vendita in blocco a un collezionista privato concretizza qualcuno di questi temi?

DP In ogni cantiere a cui hai chiesto in prestito le rampe hai messo un cartello. Gli utenti venivano indirizzati alla posizione di ciascuna rampa all’interno della mostra che, in certi casi, era molto lontana. Per me questi cartelli, e quelli presenti nella galleria, da cui sono stati tolti scritte e simboli, rievocavano con sagacia l’uso che ha fatto l’Arte concettuale del vernacolo minimalista per svelare i sistemi sociali e mettere in risalto i luoghi comuni che spesso ignoriamo.

PM Mettere i cartelli nei luoghi da cui era stata presa ogni rampa segue un modello inaugurato da John Knight per la sua mostra “Identity Capital” presentata all’American Fine Arts nel 1998, dove un cartoncino con il nome della galleria e le date della mostra sostituiva le

composizioni floreali sulle postazioni dei maître d’hotel nei ristoranti di Lower Manhattan frequentati dalla comunità artistica. A loro volta, le composizioni floreali componevano la sua mostra all’American Fine Arts.

DP In molte recensioni, e in vari scritti sul tuo lavoro, spesso si legge qualcosa tipo: “McArthur, che è disabile e usa la sedia a rotelle”. Pensi che una simile qualifica influenzi troppo l’interpretazione del tuo lavoro? È l’equivalente di una delle tante etichette affibbate ad altri artisti, come ad esempio nero, gay, femminista ecc.?

PM Così come Adrian Piper non avrebbe creato il lavoro di Adrian Piper se non fosse una filosofa di colore in un mondo a supremazia bianca, neanch’io avrei creato “Ramps” se non avessi usato una sedia a rotelle in un mondo che discrimina i disabili e privilegia chi non lo è. Non dico che le rampe siano il contrappunto delle sedie a rotelle. Intendo dire che una mostra come “Ramps” nasce dal continuo doverci orientare nella burocrazia da parte di chi cerca accesso laddove questo è sempre e solo secondario o subordinato (e spesso reversibile). Il mio lavoro di accumulazione non è dovuto solo al fatto che uso una sedia a rotelle ma a molto di più, è causato dal modo in cui ceto sociale, identità di genere e razza mi forniscono l’accesso. Non c’entra tanto se questo elemento biografico influenzi o meno il mio lavoro – né per eccesso né per difetto – quanto piuttosto se i critici riterranno mai le identità che sbandierano – nero, gay, povero, disabile, immigrato – costitutive di un lavoro realmente radicale senza limitarsi a usare gli elementi biografici, come spesso accade, per loro convenienza esplicativa. Invece di opporre l’artista all’identità, sarebbe più incisivo cercare di capire meglio perché l’arte contemporanea si ostina a diffondere informazioni relative alle varie categorie quando nell’arte di rado l’identità è capita. C’è ancora tanto lavoro da fare sulla reale capacità dell’arte di comprendere se stessa e le sue storie rispetto a queste “etichette”, come tu le definisci. Non che l’etichetta resti impressa su un artista, però senza il lavoro e la lotta che danno vita all’etichetta non ci sarebbe arte! L’insito gioco formale e l’invenzione nascono solo dalla resistenza e dalla profondità delle esperienze di una vita passata in un mondo che spesso esclude con violenza te, la tua famiglia e i tuoi amici.

DP A me sembra che il tuo lavoro parli a un pubblico più ampio rispetto a tanta altra arte contemporanea. Credi che sia vero?

PM Non saprei. Non espongo il mio lavoro fuori dal circuito dell’arte contemporanea. Forse tramite l’insegnamento. L’insegnamento pervade tutto il mio lavoro. E i luoghi in cui insegno sono spesso diversi: l’insegnamento di gruppo riguardo ad argomenti come la cultura della disabilità e l’orgoglio in un corso di terapia occupazionale è diverso dall’insegnamento in una serie di tre incontri sugli approcci femministi al post-umanesimo; entrambi, poi, sono diversi da una conferenza sull’arte. Se penso ad artisti che lavorano in più discipline... io non credo di farlo del tutto. In fondo ho appena cominciato a considerare l’arte una professione! Forse, invece che a un pubblico più ampio, parlo o vorrei parlare a pubblici diversi ed eterogenei, cosa che ovviamente richiede e sollecita diversi tipi di linguaggio, specie se questi pubblici sono formati da appena un paio di persone, così da sembrare intimi. Più che altro voglio *ascoltare* pubblici diversi ed eterogenei. Oltre agli artisti, i miei amici più cari sono persone laureate o che lavorano in organismi impegnati nelle riforme delle politiche o che non

hanno un impiego a tempo pieno retribuito. La teoria critica mi entusiasma, ma non sono un’accademica; credo molto alla possibilità del cambiamento, ma non sono un’attivista. Forse è una cosa personale, più che professionale.

DP Parliamo del termine “attivista”. Pensi che la tua professione rientri in parte nella sfera della “Scultura sociale”, ovvero di un’arte che ha le potenzialità di trasformare la società tramite l’interazione del pubblico con le opere, sperando che non cada in una delle trappole in cui l’Estetica relazionale si è imbattuta negli ultimi anni con la sua tendenza a rivolgersi solo a un pubblico elitario di ceto alto fatto di addetti ai lavori?

PM Non penso molto alla Scultura sociale e all’Estetica relazionale. Non ho studiato il lavoro di Joseph Beuys, forse dovrei. Il fatto che l’Estetica relazionale sia diventata una professione e una disciplina emergente mi sembra di gran lunga più basilare, per esempio nell’allestimento di un evento, che chiede precisione e ingegno anche se è molto caotico. Per allestire molti eventi in un arco di tempo occorre organizzazione e il lavoro di un movimento sociale. Se si vuole imparare a organizzare basta studiare il lavoro di Grace Lee Boggs, non occorre realizzarlo come un progetto isolato sotto l’ombrello dell’arte. È più che altro una questione di tempo e dedizione, non riguarda uno stile o un movimento interno alla storia dell’arte.

DP Hai anche scritto e presentato a dei convegni alcuni temi della tua ultima mostra. Lo consideri un altro aspetto della tua professione artistica?

PM No, ma il contenuto è molto collegato, e forse lo è anche l’obiettivo dei miei lavori.

DP A cosa stai lavorando adesso? La mostra “Passive Vibration Isolation” alla galleria Lars Friedrich di Berlino e il progetto per il centro Yale Union di Portland, Oregon, sembrano andare verso una nuova direzione, ma sono molto vicini alle tematiche del tuo lavoro precedente.

PM Il lavoro per la Lars Friedrich è stato realizzato usando miei pantaloni del pigiama strappati da amici e parenti che mi aiutavano a entrare e uscire dal letto. Ho chiamato queste sculture “commodus”. L’origine latina è “commodus” [comodo], con un accenno alla comodità. Da qui ha anche origine “commodity” [bene, merce], quindi c’è anche un elemento di scambio e di facilitazione dei rapporti di scambio. Il mio intento è esprimere perché il concetto di accoglienza è quantomai inadeguato. Buona parte di ciò che viene identificato come “accesso” – che si tratti di ascensori, rampe, scritte in braille, politiche di giustizia sociale, un prestito – è una proposta relazionale irrisoria: una rampa può far entrare e uscire una persona da un luogo, ma dentro cosa succede? Io non voglio essere accolta, voglio contribuire a cambiare i sistemi e le strutture che considerano la mia presenza un atto di accoglienza. In un’intervista televisiva del 1963 a Miami James Baldwin ha parlato di diritti civili e di come la tecnica della “Repubblica”, come lui chiama gli Stati Uniti, sia sempre stata quella di accogliere la richiesta di diritti. All’epoca in cui ha rilasciato l’intervista, però, ha detto che “la tecnica dell’accoglienza ha fallito”. Baldwin si riferisce all’immagine che ha di sé la supremazia bianca capitalista: una società che accoglie gli afroamericani. In genere i movimenti sociali sono contrari all’accoglienza. E se ribaltissimo (molti l’hanno fatto) i termini dell’accoglienza per dichiarare, invece, che noi non accogliamo più l’oppressione strutturale che ci accoglie tramite tattiche di inclusione:

non accogliamo più il razzismo, non accogliamo più la distruzione del nostro pianeta, non accogliamo più il sessismo, non accogliamo più la brutalità della polizia, non accogliamo più la discriminazione dei disabili nella nostra vita quotidiana.

DP Sì, e anche il lavoro sonoro che hai fatto per il centro Yale Union sembra dedicato ad alcuni di questi temi importanti, ma in maniera diversa.

PM Il lavoro s’intitola *Files*. L’ho realizzato con Alex Fleming, mentre Anthony Tran ha progettato il software che, oltre ad animare e strutturare il lavoro, loggava ogni file suonato in sequenza sul sito della Yale University per tutta la durata della mostra. I pezzi suonavano al cambiare di stato di una catena di Markov. Una Catena di Markov è la materia fondante alla base del calcolo delle probabilità riguardo a quanto spesso si verificherà un cambiamento di stato: una sorta di lettera prestampata preesistente che influisce su politica e affari perché si applica alla vita della gente – motori di ricerca e valutazioni di rischio delle polizze assicurative sulla vita, per citarne un paio. Momo Ishiguro ha prodotto la base che suona simultaneamente ai campioni audio da infermiere-robot, video di Youtube, registrazioni di sesso telefonico e un testo sugli abusi nelle cliniche per disabili, sui detenuti con malattie mentali e sulle proprietà fisiche dei parabordi in gomma per il carico delle merci.

DP Trovi che l’arte sia il modo migliore per accostarsi a queste tematiche estremamente complesse e importanti? Posso chiederti, infine, cosa speri di realizzare con la tua professione?

PM Sì, credo nelle capacità dell’arte e degli artisti di accostarsi a questi temi. E, più che ad accostarsi, credo nella capacità di comprenderli e di mostrarne il funzionamento, comprese le metafore su cui poggiano. Spero di non perfezionare solo una pratica artistica.

by **Natalia Siewewicz**

Il lavoro di Darja Bajagić ricontestualizza immagini ammiccanti, identificate dallo sguardo occidentale in maniera stereotipa – l’astuta volpe slava o la moglie russa per corrispondenza – dotandole di un’ambiguità liberatoria. La conversazione con Natalia Siewewicz ci parla del suo lavoro, di Agamben e di pornografia.

NATALIA SIEWEWICZ L’eversione dalle ideologie dominati o un’ostentata identificazione con esse, prima e dopo la caduta del Muro di Berlino, erano in primo piano nel lavoro della neoavanguardia dell’Europa dell’Est, specie fra gli artisti che a quelle ideologie tentavano di resistere. Penso in particolare alla band slovena Laibach e al Concettualismo moscovita, che si sono serviti dell’estetica totalitaria, o a Oleg Kulik, che rappresenta gli stereotipi dell’Altro dell’Europa dell’Est in “I Bite America and America Bites Me”. Nel tuo lavoro ti appropri dell’immaginario sessuale che circola in rete e lo organizzi meticolosamente in composizioni formali. In passato hai anche creato varie identità e, sui social media, hai intrapreso relazioni con uomini assumendo le sembianze delle donne sexy dell’Europa dell’Est. Credi che il porno possa essere un veicolo di eversione e trasgressione?

DARJA BAJAGIĆ Adoro i Laibach, una delle mie magliette (e immagini) preferite è loro, c’è scritto: “Al diavolo la libertà d’espressione!” Hai ragione, in passato, quando non ero ancora adolescente, collezionavo immagini – pornografiche e non – di ragazze prese da Internet che usavo come prestanome in vari social network. Non si trattava di un progetto artistico, ero solo impacciata. Credo che la pornografia possa essere, e sia, un veicolo di eversione e trasgressione. La sua forza risiede nel suo essere contemporanea e neutralizzata o potenzialmente tale: inefficace e disattivata nel suo uso “vecchio” o “originale”, illimitata in usi “nuovi” o “tradotti”.

La lettura superficiale di un’immagine pornografica (o di qualunque altra cosa) non è efficace. In genere c’è di più da vedere (o da non vedere mai) di quanto si veda. Facciamo un esempio: 1) “una ragazza seduta su un letto si tocca mentre legge un libro” oppure 2) “una ragazza seduta su un letto si tocca mentre legge The Fermata di Nicholson Baker” (si veda *Sample XXX Puzzle-- Pin-up Land™ Cum-centration*, 2013 al minuto 6:20). Il titolo del libro amplia l’interpretazione dell’immagine. È un elemento che emancipa. Anche se solo per poco, viene desessualizzata, neutralizzata in tal senso.

Questa neutralizzazione è fondamentale. Mi sento molto influenzata da Agamben. La sua analisi che preferisco è quella di Chloë des Lysses in Profanazioni, dove la pornografia è ritenuta un luogo che consente il superamento di ogni divisione sociale, non un fenomeno globale da criticare, elogiare o censurare, o da salvare.

NS Visto che hai citato Agamben, parliamo dell’etica dell’appropriazione. Le donne ritratte sulle tue tele fissano l’osservatore con occhio critico e sicurezza penetranti, non con vulnerabilità, come se non intendessero obbedire a lui e al suo desiderio. Questo esempio d’indifferenza è un elemento decisivo nel tuo processo di selezione delle immagini?

DB Sì, rileggo spesso Agamben, specialmente gli scritti su Chloë des Lysses. Egli scrive spesso di come lei ostenti indifferenza, inespressività, rendendo così inefficace l’apparato pornografico: il suo viso appare come un “puro mezzo”. (La foto di lei che preferisco è quella in cui accarezza un gatto mentre subisce una penetrazione anale).

Nella maggior parte delle mie immagini, lo sguardo delle ragazze – che fissa l'osservatore – è anche liberatorio, è un modo diverso di entrare nell'immagine. Anche se solo per poco, disattiva l'evento, il soggetto, e attiva una nuova prospettiva. È quasi come una nuova vita.

Mi piace anche pensarlo come: "Qui lo zimbello sei tu".

NS A proposito di ricontestualizzazione e disattivazione delle immagini in cui ti imbatti in rete e che usi nel tuo lavoro, penso al testo *Further Materials toward the Theory of a Hot Babe di Hannah Black*, in cui l'autrice definisce la "babe" (bambola) "l'incarnazione della piattezza e del vuoto dell'immagine", quasi una non-soggettività che non lascia traccia. Puoi parlarci della piattezza delle immagini che adoperi e di quella dei tuoi dipinti intesi come cornici?

DB La piattezza delle mie immagini poggia sulla convinzione che esse abbiano un significato diverso, o ulteriore, rispetto a quello che sembrano avere: "puro, profano, libero" (Agamben). La loro disattivazione si verifica tramite una ricontestualizzazione reificante su pannelli di tela prevalentemente monocolori, quindi livellanti. Vengo ispirata dai layout delle pagine di Internet, o delle riviste – metodi di presentazione che generano una particolare serialità, e impressioni. Penso, poi, a cosa succederebbe se i testi di quelle pagine fossero eliminati o se venissero abilmente sostituiti con altri testi o con testi pieni di refusi e traduzioni sbagliate.

NS A proposito di traduzione e perdita, bisogna tener presente il particolare contesto socio-politico e geografico in cui siamo nati (Polonia, Montenegro) in relazione all'importazione ed esportazione di pornografia da quella regione. Parlo della ripercussione politica sugli stati ex socialisti che sono entrati nel libero mercato negli anni Novanta, dovendo confrontarsi con i vecchi valori tradizionalisti, da un lato, e con il nuovo ordine sociale del Turbocapitalismo, dall'altro. Ciò che trovo interessante nel tuo lavoro è come renda infantile, in modo spiritoso, la fantasia occidentale sulla sessualità e sul desiderio dell'Europa dell'Est: l'astuta volpe slava pronta a tutto con la sua jouissance esuberante, la moglie russa ordinata per corrispondenza, incantevole purché non morda. Mi chiedo se il tuo approccio si possa percepire come una strategia che destabilizza o frustra lo sguardo maschile occidentale. Puoi spiegarci come si manifesta nel tuo lavoro e magari perché è importante per te in relazione al Montenegro?

DB Più che sullo sguardo "maschile", forse mi soffermo sullo sguardo "occidentale". Anche se sono nata in Montenegro, ho un rapporto strano e distante con quel posto perché ci ho vissuto non più di un anno. È stato grazie a cartoline e biglietti e alla gente se sono entrata in contatto con il mio paese. Perciò il mio sguardo è una combinazione di Est e Ovest.

Ricordo chiaramente un evento a cui, forse, posso ricondurre l'inizio della mia reale attrazione per l'Est: a quindici anni, in un bagno per donne, ho conosciuto delle bellissime ragazze dei Balcani che sono rimaste scioccate al sapere che non avevo idea di chi fossero i loro cantanti preferiti "turbo-folk" (come, per esempio, Ceca Ražnatovi).

Io riuscivo solo a ridicolizzare le cose della mia terra e, soprattutto tramite Internet, a trovare conferma o smentita delle mie fantasie con mia madre.

Le mie caricature dell'astuta volpe slava e della moglie russa ordinata per corrispondenza sono presentate al tempo stesso come vere e false: è questa oscillazione a destabilizzare e a frustrare, perché in ultima analisi è insoddisfacente; è lì, a disposizione, eppure non lo è.

Un esempio è *Untitled (YMETHOCT HE 3HA ZA GAPAHЦИJE (ART does not know WARRANTY))* del 2014 (incluso in "Private Settings" al Museo d'Arte Moderna di Varsavia): una delle immagini ritratte nel dipinto è il primo piano di una nota, benché inesistente, moglie russa da ordinare per corrispondenza, una delle ragazze esibite dall'utilissimo sito web Russian Detective, ricco di informazioni.

È vitale che esista questa doppia lettura. In fondo non c'è mai una sola prospettiva.

NS Viviamo in un'era di estrema espressione di sé ed economia dell'attenzione in cui cancelliamo di continuo i confini tra finzione e autenticità. Curiosando sul tuo account Twitter ho notato dei post in cui dichiaro "Non chiamatemi bambola, chiamatemi puttana" o "Angelo di giorno, diavolo di notte". Mi hanno fatto pensare ai titoli provocatori delle tue opere come *How Badly Do You Want To See Me Hold My Pigtails Up?* Che rapporto c'è fra linguaggio e autoidentificazione nel tuo lavoro, e il tuo personaggio on-line?

DB Uso Twitter (secondo una stima prudente, l'80 per cento dei miei tweet proviene da altre fonti) per trovare frasi, parole e immagini che in genere rappresentano i temi attuali.

Non ritengo il mio account l'incarnazione di un personaggio, ma se lo considerassi tale incarnerebbe il personaggio di una delle ragazze delle mie immagini, o di tutte loro.

Molti dei miei titoli riflettono i miei post su Twitter: "Angelo di giorno, diavolo di notte" proviene da una toppa termoadesiva comprata online, con tanto di errore di ortografia, e adesso è anche il titolo di un dipinto in cui ho inserito la toppa. (Altre volte i titoli riflettono i nomi dei file delle immagini incluse nei lavori, così come li trovo). Altre toppe, che ho messo nei dipinti, dicono: "Sono invisibile, solo gli stronzi possono vedermi" o "Divertiti, potrei non passare mai più da queste parti": è buffo immaginare i dipinti come i narratori di quelle frasi, o quelle frasi come i motti delle ragazze, accanto a cui sono attaccate le toppe. Poi c'è il secco e sempre spiazzante: "Grazie per aver guardato". È sarcastico o sincero?

Non sai bene se ridere o piangere.

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Hans Ulrich Obrist and Simon Castets interview young artist DARJA BAJAGIĆ

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In a recent tweet you said, “There are people who believe that things that shouldn’t be shown.” Do you believe that pornography shouldn’t be there? And if it is there, that it must be shown?

A conservative estimate would be that 80% of my tweets are sourced from elsewhere; that one was taken from a *New York Times* article, “Messy Humanity, Warts, Dreams and All,” on Ulrich Seidl’s *Paradise* trilogy. At fuller length, it reads: “Speaking of a scene in *Dog Days* in which two men torment a woman, Mr. Seidl, 60, said by phone from Vienna, “There are people who believe that things that shouldn’t be there mustn’t be shown.” I believe pornography has



curmudgeons and critics who will be the arbiters of art’s new direction. It is always the artists. It will be fascinating to watch how the next artistic generation deals with the new audience’s openness and fluency in visual culture. Will it be art for all, or art for the elite? ☺



a place in this world, as does everything else. I appreciate its subversiveness.

You started collecting, and working with, these kinds of images as a teenager, eventually using them for zines. What compelled you to start collecting them?

One of my earliest memories—at six years of age—is of taking photographs of a television screen at my uncle Boris's house, on which my cousin

Raško and I were watching a pornographic film.

Later, as a pre-teenager, I was collecting images—both pornographic and not—of girls on the Internet to use as aliases on various social networking websites. I would habitually browse, looking at images of girls—first out of boredom, then curiosity—in my father's Playboys, and via WebTV cha-

The image search and collection process is like hunting.

Previous page:
A06, 2014

Left:
Devil Girl Stamp, 2014

Below:
Come to the Dark Side We Have Cookies!!!, 2014

Right:
Kill Bill: After, 2014

rooms and forums. This was not an art project—I was just socially awkward. Those images were my friends.

The beginning of including these kinds of images into an art practice, it took the form of cut-up, deconstructed collages: juxtaposing a bruised thigh with a pattern from a blanket. I then started recreating the “collages”



I was collecting online—“collages” as in everything, ranging from book covers to website layouts, disparaging celebrity photographs with text overlays from forums—to be juxtaposed with those original “collages” from the printed zines. I would liken the search and collection to hunting.

Your earlier works were very minimalist paintings. Many of your current works still carry through that minimalist, monochrome aesthetic, but overall, your work has changed quite drastically. What prompted this change? How did the transition unfold?

I do not see them as so different, ultimately—rather, only at a surface level. The black paintings were commenced at Yale, during my very last month in the graduate program. They stemmed from my desire to combine images from my collection with new forms; I’d done the same thing earlier with videos. In the gray paintings, the images had been scattered about, often nearly concealed. The images in the black paintings are more available—partially obscured at times by flaps, but still, more available.

During the process, I thought a lot about Ad Reinhardt—his “ultimate” paintings, his satirical cartoons—and Thomas Hirschhorn—his collages, and his texts about his collages. I like that they are always suspicious, are not taken seriously, resist information and facts, are unprofessional, create a truth of their own....

You have said that you want to present the images as “blank images,” by “forcing the viewer to come to terms with all of that baggage and then ignoring it simultaneously” in order to see the images on a formal level. When you ignore that baggage, what do you see in the images?

I don’t think a surface reading of any one thing is an efficient one. By ignoring the primary reading—the first impact, the “baggage”—one becomes more open to exploring other perspectives and comes to terms with assumptions and beliefs. This is an act of neutralization, or desexualization: it occurs not only in the works’ imagery employed, but in the viewer as well.

Seeing the images on a formal level is one way of beginning to set aside, the “baggage” to and see the images from a different perspective. For example, you might consider a prop you’d missed: 1) “a girl is sitting on a bed, simultaneously rubbing herself and reading a book” versus 2) “a girl is sitting on

a bed, simultaneously rubbing herself and reading *The Fermata* by Nicholson Baker” (see *Sample XXX Puzzle– Pin-up Land™ Cum-centration*, 2013, at 6:20). It’s emancipatory.

There are several recurring motifs, in your work: chess boards, puzzle pieces and crosswords. What is the significance of these images for you?

Chess signifies a back-and-forth between things. The board’s pattern has associations of duality, polarity—ideas still relevant to me. Puzzle pieces signify parts of a greater, unknown “whole.” Crosswords signify that there are spaces to fill—they are left empty: you have to figure it out yourself.

89plus is a long-term, international, multi-platform research project co-founded by Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist, investigating the generation of innovators born in or after 1989 through conferences, books, periodicals, residencies and exhibitions. 89plus.com



Your recent work also appropriates material such as serial killers' letters and drawings. How do you see this content related to the other content? Are this and pornography both representations of "evil"?

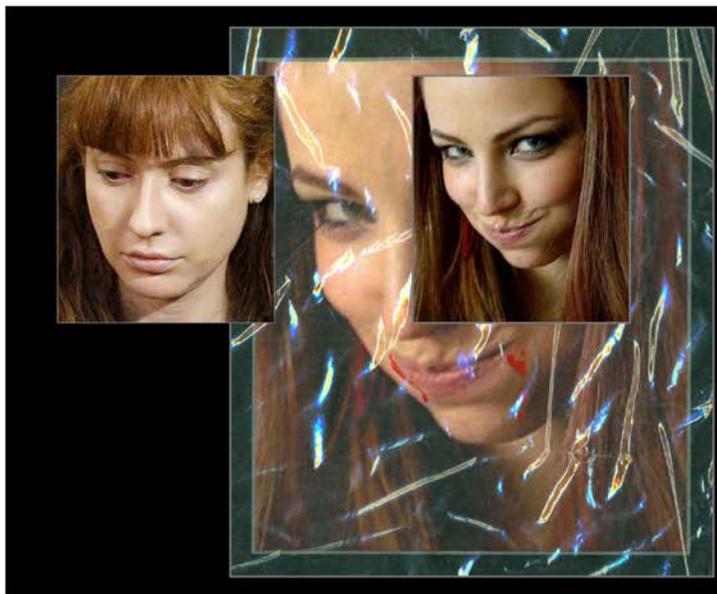
No, they are not representations of "evil" because—to quote Alain Badiou—"Evil does not exist except as a judgment made."

I collect serial killers' ephemera that depict she-devils, pornographic actresses, and other representations of women. It relates to the pornographic images—they both raise questions about conceptions of "good" and "evil" and are forms of collective self-expression—pure, profane, free.

You've said you "don't think that women need to be saved." Can you explain what you mean by this?

This was in response to a question about my "refusal to be an activist about my subject." I do not want to rehabilitate anyone, or not to rehabilitate anyone. That is not my job.

You avoid being photographed and in the past have reported any tagged photos of you on Facebook. What is it about



your own image being captured and shared that you don't like?

I prefer the focus to be placed on the artworks, including the girls in the artworks—their faces, their gazes. Somehow, they seem more representative of me. There is more of me to see in them than in me.

What kind of social media do you use / not use and why?

I use Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter. I use Instagram to share my own images; Tumblr for news and updates; Twitter

for words. I do not use Facebook—it feels too personal and invasive.

All images courtesy of the artist.

Would you follow yourself on Instagram?

I mostly post pictures of awkward, amusing texts ("Call Me! / I'll Whip Your Ass Purple!"), or semi-gore images from B-horror movie reviews, or cute animals. I am into all this stuff, so yes, I would follow myself!

We are interested in compiling a book of interviews based on banal security questions asked when one sets up an online account. In what year was your father born?

1954.

What is your mother's maiden name?

Radović.

I appreciate the subversiveness of pornography.

What was the name of your elementary school?

Pakistan International School, and Donley Elementary School.

What is your oldest sibling's birthday month and year?

I have one sibling, and his name is Filip; his birthday month is November and year is 1978.

What is your favorite color?

Gray.

For the 89plus Marathon in 2013, you participated digitally through your work *The A Project*, in which you checked out a book from your university's library and marked out every appearance of the letter A, keeping a tal-

ly along the way. Where does a project like this sit in your oeuvre?

The book was *Elogio della menzogna* (ed.: Salvatore S. Nigro)—Italian, of 154 marked pages. Online, its “subjects” are listed as “Truthfulness and Falsehood” and “Deception—Early works to 1800.” The cover of the book features the painting *Portrait of a Woman of the Hofer Family*, dated about 1470 and belong-

Darja Bajagić (Montenegrin, b. 1990) is an artist who lives and works in New York. She is represented by Room East, New York.

ing to the collection of the National Gallery, London; the artist remains unknown, as does the sitter. The de-

I don't think a surface reading of any one thing is an efficient one.

scription of the painting on the National Gallery's website reads, “On her headdress is a fly, either a symbol of mortality or a reminder of the artist's skills of illusion.”

I was drawn to this indecipherability, the sense of mystery. The project began as a passive, then active nihilistic endeavor—and a questioning of meaningfulness. I dwelled on this idea: “Thinking is an arbitrary fiction, the false sign of an equally false inner experience.” ☹

Milovan Farronato and Goshka Macuga share memories of STROMBOLI

AS THE CULTURAL CALENDAR INCREASINGLY BECOMES A FEAST OF OPPORTUNITIES TO FLY OFF THE BEATEN TRACK, THE PANORAMA SERIES TRAVELS THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF WRITERS AND ARTISTS.



All images:
Goshka Macuga
Courtesy of
the artist.

MF: I remember the first time I saw you was underwater. It was August 2009, and you were diving for sea urchins, wearing a one-piece bathing suit, kept together by strings and ribbons revealing your pale skin. I, on the other hand, was wearing a makeshift burkini to protect myself from the sun.

When we first met, we were swimming. The water was dark, warm and deep; the mountains around us, collapsed and eroding, seemed in constant flux.

We had spoken before this encounter—on the phone, never in person. You had arrived in Stromboli from Venice, where you were participating in the Biennale with one of your first tapestries.

We were in front of the Sciarra del Fuoco, the only area where the volcano's lava meets the sea yet without endangering the two nearby villages: Stromboli and Ginostra. We were swimming at the feet of the active volcano—a triangular podium resonating with loud opinions spoken from his crater every fifteen minutes or so. At the time, the volcano had three mouths; today, he has thirteen. That trinity of voices has now become a chorus.

I realize I've been speaking of the

PANORAMA



At NADA, a Fresh Crop of Young Talent

CULTURE BY [JOSEPH AKEL](#) MAY 15, 2015 2:45 PM

With all the commotion of Frieze New York playing out uptown on Randall's Island, it might be easy to overlook the action unfolding at the decidedly downtown New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) fair. Now in its fifth year, the New York arm of NADA (the other fair takes place in Miami) once again returns to Pier 36, exhibiting 100 galleries in a cavernous warehouse space bordered by the Lower East Side and the East River. Billed as a nonprofit arts organization with the aim of promoting new and emerging artists, NADA has gained a reputation as a go-to destination for art world insiders and collectors looking to take the pulse of the next generation of artists.

Fair highlights include the exhibition mounted by the New York-based Johannes Vogt Gallery, a series of three paintings by Josh Reames. With images of cigarettes, an erotically tinged neon light and a grinning skeleton, Reames's choice of imagery channels the über-cool aesthetic of the fair's attendees. "Introducing new artists is what the spirit of NADA stands for," Vogt, a longtime veteran of the fair, says. A similar sentiment was expressed by his fellow NADA alum Risa Needleman, the co-founder, along with Benjamin Tischer, of the Lower East Side gallery Invisible-Exports, which is exhibiting works including vibrant photomontages by Matthew Porter — sure to please NADA visitors who, as Needleman is keenly aware, "expect young and exciting work."

For first-timers, the fair is a unique opportunity to gain exposure — and importantly, access — to an often-exclusive segment of the art world. "The best way for young European galleries to enter into the U.S. market is through NADA," Berthold Pott, owner of his namesake Cologne-based gallery, says. Among Pott's exhibited pieces, large-scale ink-based gestural works by Max Frintrop call to mind the likes of the Abstract Expressionist Helen Frankenthaler and her watery fields of color. Meanwhile, another first-time gallery, the New York-based Queer Thoughts, looked to be in for the ultimate NADA experience. Having just arrived at the fair, the megawatt curator and writer Hans Ulrich Obrist and the Stedelijk Museum director Beatrix Ruf were overheard declaring the gallery's exhibition of Darja Bajagic's "Ex Axes — Larissa Riquelme (2015)," an ax bearing the photograph of a despairing young woman, to be the highlight of NADA. Talk about making the cut.

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Highlights 2014 – Jörg Heiser

DECEMBER 28, 2014



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‘Private Settings’, at Warsaw’s Museum of Modern Art, curated by Natalia Sielewicz, was one of the more inspiring group shows I saw this year, tackling the datasphere and its implications for art. The exhibition more or less bypassed the ‘3-D printer’ novelty character often associated with Post-Net work that has become a kind of stigma already in the ears of many these days, indicating Zeitgeist art eager to churn out sellable objects with shiny gadgety surfaces while promoting retrograde concepts of technological progressivism. Instead, involving a geographically wide range of artists from Saudi-Arabia (Sarah AbuAbdallah) to Thailand (Korakrit Arunonandchai), the emphasis was put on identity politics – on the way gender roles play out, or on the way online imagery co-structures our desires and fantasies, while keeping the underlying big data economies in mind. Irish artist Yuri Pattison asked Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to photograph/film the view from their window, turning the premise of cheap labour into an invitation to produce contemplative imagery of often drab environments; Canadian artist Jon Rafman’s little makeshift video display – a kind of small cockpit built into a drawer, allowing one viewer at a time – featured strangely fascinating footage of online fetish imagery, of people in furry costumes, or a bodybuilder crashing a watermelon with his hefty leg muscles. Another highlight were the collages of Montenegro-born Darja Bajagic, who tackles the stereotypically sexualized imagery of Eastern-European women found on the Web and elsewhere by combining them into deadpan minimalist collages involving wallpaper and simple paper cut-outs.

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VULTURE

DEVOURING CULTURE

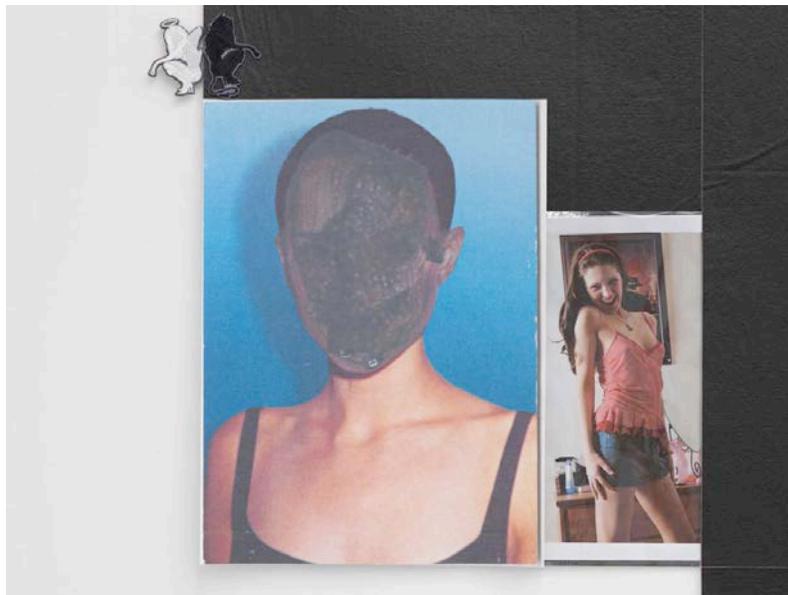
The 19 Best Art Shows of 2014

By Jerry Saltz

December 10, 2014 1:25 p.m.

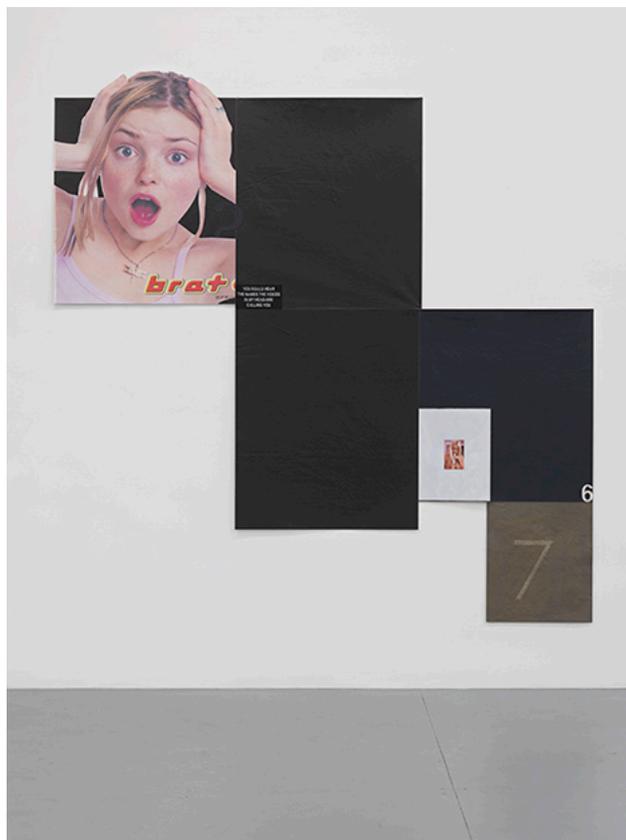
6. Darja Bajagic, “Cold Comfort,” at Room East

This debut solo show is by an artist who says the dean of the Yale School of Art called her “crazy” and claimed that she was sick for “being okay, as a woman, with these kinds of images even existing in the world, let alone propelling them in paintings and in the gallery system.” Bajagic harnessed dark forces in paintings and shadowy collages that bring together sex, violence, lone-liness, fantasy, and imagination, and in one show, she joined the artists Elaine Cameron-Weir, Andra Ursuta, Dawn Kasper, Lucy Dodd, and others in a strain of feminism that takes no prisoners and is thankfully and unapologetically upon us.



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Darja Bajagic, You Should Hear the Names the Voices In My Head Are Calling You (2014). Image courtesy of the artist and ROOM EAST.

DARJA BAJAGIC

Room East / New York

by **Bansie Vasvani** ·

November 4, 2014 · in **November 2014, Reviews**

Showcasing appropriated images of young girls alongside pornography from niche fetish websites in her daring mixed-media works, Darja Bajagic's solo exhibition

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offers “Cold Comfort,” as the show’s title so aptly indicates. The recent Yale MFA grad stirred controversy in the halls of that venerated school for her work’s seemingly apolitical stance on this taboo. Accused of irresponsibly promulgating pornography instead of steering away from it, Bajagic compels the viewer to confront the societal proscription of her subject matter.



Darja Bajagic, *I'm Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me*, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and ROOM EAST.

In *You Should Hear the Names the Voices In My Head Are Calling You* (2014), a picture of a young girl, her mouth wide open, stares mockingly at the viewer. Diagonally opposite, a smaller porn image of a topless woman holding a dildo between her breasts looks on seductively. The word “brat,” which refers to a '90s zine

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that voiced a critical youth perspective on politics and culture, emblazons the asymmetrical black canvas panels affixed with these lurid images of youth and the sex trade and upends our assumptions about female sexuality.

Similarly, in *Come To The Dark Side We Have Cookies* (2014), a provocative picture of a woman is mostly concealed behind black canvas flaps that can be raised to reveal the entire image. This element of furtiveness, derived from the flaps, recalls the secrecy of peep shows in the '70s and suggests the forbidding and darker side of the sex trade, just as much as the invisible faces covered by a black scarf and ski mask hint at danger and violence in *I'm Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me* (2014). These images of sexual innuendo are juxtaposed with pictures of debonair young girls in camisoles reminiscent of an underaged Nabokovian Lolita. Bajagic's deliberate combination of innocence and carnal allure points to her larger concern about the objectification of the female body.



Darja Bajagic, *Come To The Dark Side We Have Cookies!!!* (detail) (2014). Image courtesy of the artist and ROOM EAST.

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Yet her union of spare black canvases with sensational female images removed from their original context highlights Bajagic's strategy to neutralize and desexualize pornography. Empowered by their ability to look the viewer in the eye, these commodified women are presented in a new light. Their gaze is directed at the perpetrator, whose prurient interest is met from a position of refusal and mockery. By entering a previously male domain, Bajagic situates her work outside the voyeuristic concern. And by employing shocking and unsettling captions, she allows the viewer to accept the severity of the imagery and cue its interpretation.

Unlike the painter Sue Williams, whose cartoonish imagery often subdued the sexual violence she was confronting, Bajagic's female figures bring our attention closer to the discomfort of her mission. Not always aesthetically pleasing or easily acceptable, her work has the strength of creating a new place for the ostracized other, and chips away at preconceived notions of taboo.

Ultimately, Bajagic's own experience as the outsider—from her birth in Montenegro, upbringing in Egypt, and emigration to the U.S. at the age of nine—places her in a strong position to rebut instead of accept social alienation for herself as much as for the deprecated women she champions.

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Why Darja Bajagić Appropriates Porn and Serial Killer Art

Christie Chu, Friday, September 26, 2014

Hot on the heels of her graduation from Yale's painting MFA program, her first solo show on the Lower East Side at [ROOM EAST](#), an upcoming group show at the [Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw](#), and a [rave review from New York magazine's Jerry Saltz](#), [Darja Bajagić](#) is without question an emerging artist to watch out for. Just 24 years old, the Montenegro-born, New York-based artist has been a nomad since childhood, living in cities including Cairo and Chicago. Her work, which incorporates pornographic imagery and serial killer "murderabilia," seems to be the beginning of a career that will surely garner a lot of the attention from the art world and the Internet.

Even before graduating, Bajagić was already whipping up controversy within the Yale MFA department, albeit unintentionally. The head of the department, art historian [Robert Storr](#), had such a problem with her use of pornography that he [called her crazy](#) and suggested she go to therapy on Yale's budget. Her interest in pornography, Bajagić says, is

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primarily cultural. She recalls her earlier works as being stylistically minimal, but she eventually sought to merge the conventions of painting and porn. By employing certain compositional strategies she wants to prod viewers into deconstructing her images, rather than simply seeing pornographic photos laden with gendered meaning, or focusing on why a female artist would be interested in pornography in the first place.

Her artwork opens up conversations on complex issues such as power struggles between the sexes, censorship, authorship, and the digital landscape. Her work elicits a broad spectrum of reactions and reviews that range from cautiously positive to harshly negative. But to say of her work's success that "sex sells" or "it's for shock value" would be reductive.

Growing up antisocial and with access to Web TV (an almost ancient way of accessing the Internet), there were only a few things to do: watch game shows and sports, or go on chat rooms. As a girl in her early teens, living in a very protective household, the artist made up several profiles of characters she would play online. Thus began her interest in collecting sexy or raunchy images of women. Her fascination with concealment and misdirection, something that is easily achieved online, is a common theme permeating her work. Bajagić's more recent, multi-layered flap paintings flanked with laser cut-outs and patches purchased on eBay, as well as her

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serial killer art pieces (some of which contain information no one can see without altering the piece's composition), speak to this idea.



Darja Bajagic, *Dacha: Robert Bardo* 8×11 ink drawing of porn star 'Gauge' (detail)(2014).
Photo: Courtesy of artist.

But again, why does she want to incorporate serial killer art? The artist says that after the adversity she encountered at Yale, she felt it wasn't anyone's place to say what kind of art a person should make.

In fact, the department's consistent negative critique of her practice helped fuel her appetite for making this type of work. One of her series juxtaposes the memorabilia she buys online at sites like Serialkillersink.net (a very [controversial website](http://Serialkillersink.net))

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with images of a former [Soviet surveillance agency director's country home](#)—where he kept his stash of illegal pornography. Such pieces question whether authority figures (let alone laypeople) should be given the power to pass judgement on who can and cannot make art.

Bajagić follows the generation of contemporary artists who first appropriated others' imagery to make it their own—[Richard Prince](#) immediately comes to mind—but her work most certainly isn't something you've seen before. It isn't safe or pretty, and it forces viewers to face the most taboo, perverse, trashy, and fetishistic parts of our culture, an alternate world seemingly so distant, but lurking just a click away. While not many people want to aesthetically and conceptually engage with her work—perhaps because they can't relate to porn stars and inmates, or simply from fear of things outside their comfort zone—the dialogue it creates will endure when most art simply aims to please. What's next for the rising artist? Besides working on her art, she will be collaborating with Oliver Vereker on the artwork for the second release from his experimental, noise-techno label, [Endangered Species](#), slated for November.

The music is his own, while the image set to accompany Vereker's music is of Natalie Portman's scratched out face, taken from Bajagić's piece I'm Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me. Between his sonic tendencies and her artwork's satanic

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references, the pairing evokes a scene like the opening club sequence in Stephen Norrington's vampiric cult classic, *Blade* (1998)—[minus the blood shower](#).

Bajagić will be featured in a group show, "New Systems, New Structures 001," opening today at upstart Brooklyn gallery [William Arnold](#). The gallery will be open on Sundays from 1–6 p.m., or by appointment only.



Endangered Species' Restraint, front cover.

Photo: Courtesy the artist.

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Jerry Saltz Dives Into the Lower East Side Art Scene and Emerges Optimistic

By Jerry Saltz

Hands down, the most promising young artist I saw last Sunday was 25-year-old Darja Bajagic at Room East. We get shaped asymmetrical assemblages that use painted and printed canvas, letters of prisoners who write to young women who write to them, and clipped images from *Brat* magazine that cater to men who fetishize pubescent girls and the girls who want to be fetishized. There's a drawing from a serial killer and decals of busty she-devils firing guns and buxom angels who only hold them. It's hellfire voodooed beautiful and a delve into the cursed and excommunicated who still live in society looking for ways to express their yearnings. These yearnings can rub people raw or the wrong way, as Bajagic knows. In a recent interview, she said that after meeting with Robert Storr, dean of the Yale Art School, "he literally told me I was crazy ... that Yale would pay for all of my counseling and therapy ... to seek help for my obsessive-compulsive behavioral habits of collecting images of girls and porn ... that I should look deep inside of myself to figure out what are the problems I have with myself, as a woman, for being O.K. with these kinds of images even existing in the world, let alone propelling them in paintings and in the gallery system."

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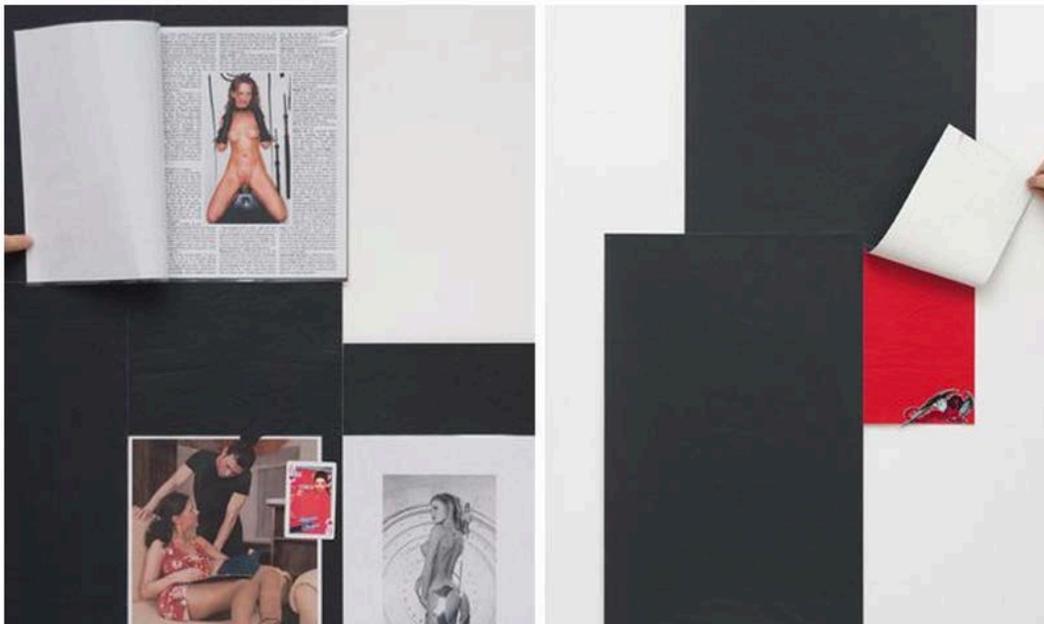
Storr was right in one respect: *Bajagic* is harnessing a dark force that is with us all the time, an image world never more than a click away, one that shadows everything we do, a world of predator, prey, the haunted, transformative forces of sex, violence, loneliness, fantasy, and imaginations that can't formulate spaces not threatening. With this show, *Bajagic* is joining fellow female artists Cameron-Weir, Andra Ursuta, Dawn Kasper, Lucy Dodd, and others too numerous to mention; a beautiful strain of feminism that takes no prisoners is upon us.

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Contrary to What You May Have Heard, Darja Bajagic Is Not Crazy

by Scott Indrisek 03/09/14 10:07 AM EDT



Darja Bajagic's "Untitled (Three)," 2014 and "Untitled (Two Devil Girls)," 2014.
(Photo by Robert Wedemeyer/ Image courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California)

It turns out that it's not always easy to transform overnight from an ultra-minimalist painter into something entirely different — say, a Conceptual artist with a penchant for mixing layered, monochromatic swaths of canvas with laser-cut icons and found imagery pulled from fetish sites catering to aficionados of naked-girls-wielding-baseball-bats. For [Darja Bajagic](#), recently graduated from Yale's M.F.A. painting program and opening her debut solo show in New York with [Room East](#) this Sunday, it was somewhat of a rocky road. The 24 year old had entered the acclaimed program with a portfolio of beyond-subtle works — the barest ripples of white-on-white, for instance,

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or canvases lightly inscribed with geometric graphite marks mirroring the outlines of a tennis court. At the same time she'd also been avidly making zines, many of them compiling found pornographic stills and other images, which she distributed to friends and online. That more incendiary portion of her oeuvre wasn't part of her application; when Bajagic finally decided to combine her two interests, she found that Yale's faculty wasn't all that appreciative.

"I met with Robert Storr, the head of the department, and he literally told me I was crazy," the artist recalled. "And that Yale would pay for all of my counseling and therapy during a leave of absence to seek help for my obsessive-compulsive behavioral habits of collecting images of girls and porn... that I should look deep inside of myself to figure out what are the problems I have with myself, as a woman, for being O.K. with these kinds of images even existing in the world, let alone propelling them in paintings and in the gallery system." Bajagic countered that she was already achieving some degree of recognition for the work, outside of the academic program: "Of course," she remembered him saying. "Sex sells."

Far from dissuading her, the resistance Bajagic experienced at Yale confirmed her own interest in the kind of loaded imagery that she'd been collecting and appropriating. She was also reluctant to cave in to an easy reading. "They wanted me to take a position of being anti-porn, but I wasn't," she said. "A lot of the conversation was about my stance, and how I could use porn, as a woman — my responsibilities to all women, everywhere. They [asked], 'What's at stake? What are you doing other than re-presenting things as they are?' Even if I was just re-presenting things as they are, which is true to some extent, why is that so problematic? These images are more complex than people give them credit for."

Many of those images are taken from Eastern European porn and niche fetish sites. (Bajagic, who was born in Montenegro and raised in Egypt, came to the States with her family when she was around 9 — but she says it's more the unique aesthetic of the erotic work that appeals to her, rather than any focus on which country it came from.) She often rephotographs or scans the originals, printing them on pieces of canvas that are then incorporated into larger compositions, augmented with flaps, eBay-purchased

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patches depicting “She-Devil” women, laser-cut numbers, and clip art culled from Photoshop. They’re a strange hybrid: Bajagic’s earlier, coolly aloof Minimalism married to the visual language of the Internet and its more esoteric and perverse nooks.

One painting includes both a scanned-and-defaced postcard image of a young Natalie Portman with a photo taken from a rubber-fetish magazine. Another compiles several images taken from a website for those titillated by lesbians wearing denim jeans; Bajagic selected a series of shots in which the models are giving the middle finger to the photographer. (She has a thing for the oddities of the genre — the “pre-explicit narrative shot of just the girl looking into the camera smiling or making a funny face.”) The works, she said, have several facets — the layered flaps, the odd, unexplained inclusion of what could be page numbers — that tie them to her earlier zine experiments. Her Room East show will also include two patches re-envisioned as large sculptures printed on metal; one, of an angel-woman sitting back-to-back with her devilish counterpart, will hang in the gallery’s front window on Orchard Street.

The exhibition will also feature new work that will do little to convince Robert Storr of Bajagic’s mental health: Prints that appropriate imagery from letters and drawings made by serial killers on death row, and include the actual ephemera (purchased from sites like [Redrum Autographs](#)) encased in a folder and framed with the print itself. “The idea of not having access to the full thing is always interesting to me,” Bajagic said — perhaps an apt way to approach her curiously compelling output thus far, which is equally tantalizing and maddening, sensual and austere, legible and yet ultimately elusive.

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BLOUIN ARTINFO

18 Must-See Gallery Shows in New York This September

by Scott Indrisek 14/08/14 7:00 AM EDT

Summer's almost over, and the New York art world returns with a vengeance early next month. To whet your appetite, we present a necessarily incomplete list of a few of the exhibitions we're most excited about as the fall kicks off — from porn-inflected conceptualism to Satanic ceramics.

Darja Bajagic at Room East (41 Orchard Street)

September 7-October 5

Anyone strolling down Orchard Street this summer likely noticed “DevilGirl Lilly Roma,” a strikingly out-of-place image featuring the titular adult-film actress by [Bajagic](#) that hung in the front window of the gallery as part of its “Abnormcore” group show. The artist layers similarly X-rated images into minimal compositions and collages; in her video works, pornographic photos accrete and layer, interrupted by the occasional cartoon bug or smiley-faced balloon. Expect to be titillated and confused in equal measure.

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Intimate strangers

September 25, 2014 - January 6, 2015

Opening: September 25 at 7 pm Curated by: Natalia Sielewicz

Who are today's "intimate strangers"? How does the rampant technological progress and our daily contact with media shape the experience of identity and social interaction?

The exhibition attempts to answer these questions from the perspective of the generation of artists born in the 1980s and 1990s, who entered the artistic scene amid the dynamic expansion of the Internet and mass digital culture, in a space full of seemingly limitless possibilities and characterised by an excess of images and information.

For the young generation, the web is not a space beyond material reality, but rather an integral element of the everyday, which encourages increasingly bold design of one's own identity and its management. While the Internet and mass access to new technologies have reshaped the intimacy of one-to-one feedback, they also provoke expressive individualism and „curating” aspirations of our virtual existence. What matters is affect and presence. And yet, the architecture of the web, in which we vehemently like, hate, recommend, blog, and create ratings, does not favour getting to know the Other, but limits us to a compulsive urge of self- documentation and an optimistic affirmation of the „friends of our friends”.

It is also a landscape of ever-blurring borders between production and consumption, the public and private domains, original and copy, the intimate and the transparent. The irresistible need to express oneself, one's opinions, and the “authenticity” of the message have had an irrevocable impact on our experience of ties and relations with another human being. Everything is changing: the record and distribution of our own selves, the manner of representation and the potential of identification. The unprecedented freedom of communication and expression generate the possibility of daily performance of gender, race, social roles and hierarchies.

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The exhibition is an answer to this striking metamorphosis of the social consciousness, highlighting it as an element which has fundamentally revalued the question of freedom, privacy

and anonymity of each and everyone of us. Young artists engage actively in these changes and shape a new language and aesthetic categories. They ask questions about the condition of the individual and the essence of visual representation: the way we perceive and express ourselves through images in the era of aggressive self-promotion and economy of attention. In a way, it can be seen a reaction to today's imperative of creative participation in public life, symbolised by the figure of a prosumer – at once a spectator and an amateur creator of culture.

Works on display at the exhibition seek to establish an interactive dialogue with the viewer at hand – not only in the gallery space, but also on the other side of the computer screen. "Intimate strangers" is also an attempt to shed a new light on the language of contemporary visual culture – from idealised stock photographs and homogenous corporate conventions, to the chill of the digital abyss and the aesthetics of amateur Internet practice, which questions the cult of the professional artist and traditional ways in which art functions in the society.

The exhibition is accompanied by an abundant programme of collateral events – from film screenings and meetings with artists, to performances by Korakrit Arunonandchai, Jesse Darling and DIS Magazine and the Internet projects by Czosnek Studio group and the artist Yuri Pattison.

Artists: Sarah AbuAbdallah and Joey Defrancesco, Korakrit Arunonandchai, Ed Atkins, Trisha Baga, Darja Bajagic, Nicolas Ceccaldi, Jennifer Chan, CUSS Group, Czosnek Studio, Jesse Darling, DIS Magazine, Harm van den Dorpel, Loretta Fahrenholz, Daniel Keller, Ada Karczmarczyk, Jason Loeb, Piotr Łakomy, Metahaven, Takeshi Murata, Yuri Pattison, Hannah Perry, Jon Rafman, Pamela Rosenkranz, Ryan Trecartin, Ned Vena

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by [Jean Kay](#) on 25/02/2014

Darja Bajagić sends me screenshots of an email she's written. It's a detailed and eloquent riposte to accusations of irresponsibility levelled at her by the **Yale School of Art** faculty, where she's completing a MFA in Painting and Printmaking. In it she references **Giorgio Agamben's Profanations** and his ideas on the possibility of neutralising and desexualising the pornographic image, of which her work is in abundance. And it is her work and they are her photos. Even if they're of other people that Bajagić doesn't know, appropriated depictions of women, nude and staring defiantly at the camera often in some kind of obscene hardcore pose. These are her pictures, stripped of their intention and brazenly held aloft.

Following **Bajagić on Twitter**, I like to retweet her dry aphorisms, relieving a slight chuckle as she drolly broadcasts, "I Love Pussy" or "Nothing gets eaten in this bed except me". But I draw the line at the photo of a woman's g-stringed butt, bent over and announcing, "Im ready for my review tomorrow". All of them make me smile but that one is more likely to cause offence, and mine is a semi-professional Twitter account. There's still a certain protocol to follow, however unclear it might be.

Bajagić's work deals directly in these taboos; sex made scandalous because no one is talking about it, at least, not in the public sphere. When you do there are boundaries, ones that she well and truly crosses, especially in terms of the "conservative and conventional" attitudes of her professors. "It sounds like such a cliché to say that but it's the truth", Bajagić tells me from her bed in New Haven, Connecticut, where she's been living and studying for the past two years. There'll be no video chat because she feels like "a sack of shit", sick after an intensified period of preparing for her thesis, where she showed '**Sample XXX Puzzle- Pin-up Land™ Cum-centration**' as part of an installation, pissing off a bunch of people in the process: "nobody thought it was funny and they were just really angry".

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I get the feeling there's more to Bajagić's refusal to show her face though, imagining she wouldn't do video even if she wasn't ill. She consciously avoids having her picture taken generally and found herself policing their appearance on Facebook when she still had an account: "if someone tagged me I would automatically report the photo". As she often does, Bajagić is chuckling while saying this but there's something deeply provocative about that attitude. Across ages "ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen", she's been constructing various identities and starting relationships with men on social media using these images of sexy and objectified eastern European women; watching her uncle's Pay-per-view porn from younger. There are reams of images, collected ever since getting her first computer ("I was a huge nerd. I didn't have any friends"), some of which appear in my downloads as a 1.3 GB folder marked 'For [Jean]' –Hito Steyerl's ambivalent image thrust into view and daring me to look at it.

It's a two-way street and there's a power in the gaze, as Bajagić's women level theirs right back at the viewer, half-concealed, slowly revealed and meticulously presented across chess game motifs, puzzle pieces and cross words. It's all a game, a strategy loaded with its own sequences and "mini narratives", thrust into a complex web of networked structures diffused across the online and offline realms –video and installation, jpeg and painting –made all the more perfidious for its own ambiguity.

Pornographic imagery is no longer exclusively the domain of 18+ sex shops and gentlemen's clubs but accessible to all. Though that's only if you have the nerve to disregard the implied etiquette and enforced censorship, things that prevent me from making a certain RT or YouTube from hosting Bajagić's latest '**Tanya versus Irena**' (2014) video. As a US immigrant, born in Montenegro, raised in Egypt and settled in Chicago before moving to New Haven to continue her studies, Darja Bajagić is no stranger to feeling like an intruder. Here, she enters and pillages what is conventionally a man's domain of female objectification, demanding she not only be included but implicating her audience in the meantime.

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aqnb: So do you think of that a form of empowerment?

DB: Yeah, I think so.

aqnb: If that empowered approach is so pervasive these days, does that make women working in contemporary porn more empowered?

DB: No, I don't think so *[laughs]*. But I think there's something in that, when the woman returns the gaze. Smiling or not really showing much expression, I think there's something powerful in that.



Darja Bajagić, 'Weekend Prince 3' (2013).
Image courtesy the artist.

aqnb: Do you think there needs to be an element of submission or violence to indulge a patronising gaze?

DB: Yeah I think so. I'm attracted to the images that are sort of confused. It's like you can't really tell if the actress is into it or not but she's kind of pretending like she is, or she's smiling or not taking it too seriously but then it's obviously very patronising, in the conventional sense.

aqnb: I've found things like amateur porn produced out of desperation to be a turn off but I suppose it can be a turn on?

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DB: I think it's a turn on. I mean, just personally I don't get off on amateur porn or like, when both parties are just enjoying themselves or something *[laughs a lot]*. I think I'm being too honest.

The faculty always ask me like, 'are you turned on by these women?' I always say, 'no I'm not, I'm not' but I don't understand why that would even be important. I can understand people being curious, if I'm actually into these girls. But it sort of annoys me so I always say no.

aqnb: It only occurred to me recently that that kind of self-exposure and provocation within an art practice isn't necessarily comfortable for the artist producing it.

DB: For me personally, maybe that's where the frustration comes in with the faculty, where they annoy me so much that I just don't give them anything in terms of my relationship to the images. They really try to take it to this personal place, which, again I understand the curiosity, like why I would collect these images and work with them so much, but at the same time I'd like the work to be about something else, not just about my habits.

aqnb: Your sexual proclivities.

DB: Yeah it's like, 'what do you do in your spare time?'

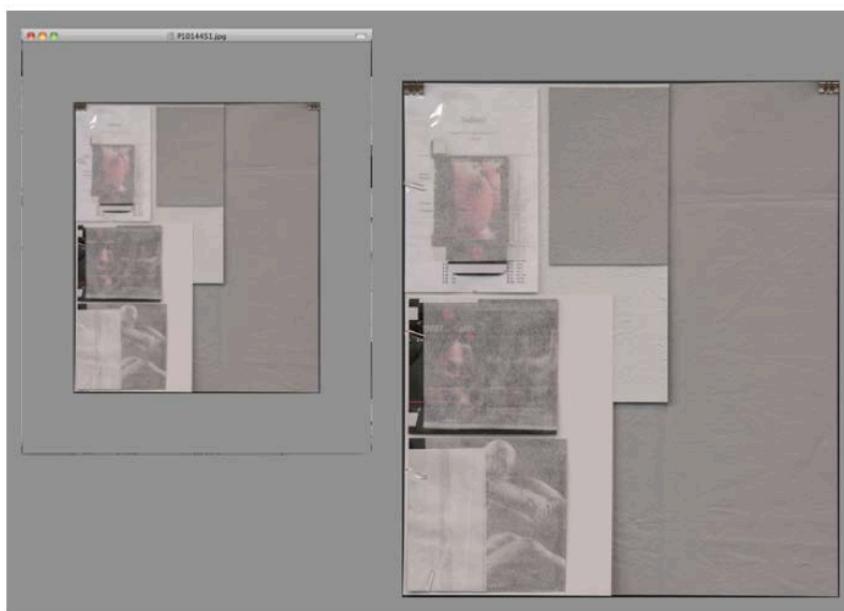


Image courtesy Darja Bajagić.

aqnb: If you think about that in terms of personalising the political, where if a radical feminist is defined as a lesbian, for example, she becomes the exception, rendering her perspective the exception by extension.

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DB: Yeah exactly, I really hate that. What about all of those male artists that work with porn? Like **Richard Kern**, who shoots porn on the side. I would love to know if **Richard Prince** bangs all those models that come through his studio but nobody's going to ask him. And if they did, he probably wouldn't tell them the truth anyway.

aqnb: When you mention finally revealing these images you've been collecting behind your earlier monochrome paintings, I get a similar sense that when you start revealing your own personal history that people start making assumptions.

DB: I think I was fighting that for a long time. In trying to force the viewer to encounter these images, I just wanted to be a blank. I didn't want myself really implicated. I guess I'm implicating myself a lot more now, obviously, but I still have this desire for these images to force people to see them for, not really for what they are, but what they give on a formal or visual level.

aqnb: When you say you don't want to be implicated, and then you talk about Richard Kern, it is like this really powerful, really defined gender distinction where a man is the prototype, the blank image, whereas a woman has all that baggage.

DB: Yeah, exactly. I've dealt with it for a long time, obviously, as far back as I can remember. In high school I made this weird porn movie. It was my first year in a pre-college program and I think I was seventeen or something.

I just found this random dude in the park and I asked him to masturbate on camera. I just got a kick off it or something and there was nothing to it except that. We got caught half way through it but I did manage to get a video. It was censored, obviously, because it was a high school show and I was so annoyed by the teachers asking me, 'what does it mean, you're a girl making this?' I thought, 'why does that even have to come into question, why can't we talk about this for its other significances?'



Darja Bajagić, 'Irena' (2014). Screenshot. Image courtesy the artist.

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aqnb: You talk a bit about reality or ‘the real’. Were your online behaviours growing up playing with that?

DB: Totally. I always think of the images as blanks. Obviously they give a lot of themselves away, some of them, especially with the amateur ones that I’m working with right now. But it’s like, ‘what is really happening here? What can you make up for yourself, or just assume?’ Looking at them from a purely formal perspective.

aqnb: So these women you work with are perceivably exports of Western perceptions of eastern European women, I’d like to know what the porn’s like in Montenegro.

DB: I’m not sure. I would just assume they would be into bimbo blondes from America or something[*laughs*]. I was sort of starting to research it but most of the porn made in Eastern Europe is made for a Western audience, it’s mostly consumed by the west. So I’m not sure really, what people there are into.

aqnb: Thinking in terms of cultural stereotypes, you don’t really get those cultural caricatures, on such a pervasive level at least, of Westerners in non-Western countries. If you think about it in terms of men being the prototype, that same Patriarchal power structure applies to the West as a whole.

DB: Yeah, even with myself, encountering people having an idea of how I am because I’m Eastern European, even though I’ve never lived there. I was just born there and as soon as I was born we left. So the most I’ve encountered of people from that part of the world was through family functions or something [*laughs*]. But just because of my name and the way that I look, people automatically assume the kind of person I am.

aqnb: There’s obviously something very confronting about the images you use; this discomfort, or tension in their ambivalence.

DB: Yeah, I like that. I think it can relate to if, for example, you’re really into watching fucked up porn and you get off on it and then right after you get off on it you have to close the tab. It’s like disgusting, it’s all these feelings in five minutes.

I wanted the video to have a little of that, ‘you’re kind of attracted to them but they’re also presented in this kind of PowerPoint and it’s like, ‘how am I supposed to read this?’ It’s making you feel really conflicted and you want to laugh but maybe people want to punch me. I like creating that space. **

Darja Bajagić is an artist currently based in New Haven.

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DAZED

Our ten favourite digifeminist artists

Class divisions, Twitter performances and cam per-whore-mances: the women making online art that matters

Text **Steph Kretowicz**

Darja Bajagic

An MFA candidate in Painting at Yale School of Art, the Montenegro-born, mostly Chicago-raised artist collects cultural ephemera illustrating eroticised intercultural representations of women – particularly Eastern European ones. Exploring those stereotypical signifiers of the sexualised body in pieces like "**Erotic Playing Cards, Russian, 2007**" and her most recent, "Sample XXX Puzzle-- Pin-up Land™ Cum-centration", it exposes the nuances and #NSFW of the online gaze.



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