



AIDS in Odessa by Andrea Diefenbach.

Jannatul Mawa, Maria Kapajeva, Cristina Nuñez, Alexandra Serrano, and Andrea Diefenbach are some of the most conspicuous names in contemporary photography. The medium they use has taken them to different countries to document actual space in connection with their imagination and reality. Therefore, the most significant aspect of their powerful images is the concept. Each concept instead of telling stories leads us into a labyrinth of questions. And inside our mind we answer those questions and line up our own stories. The stories they produce, through a reproduction process, becomes our own. We talked to the photographers about their life, philosophy, work, and production process.

Cristina Nuñez: The Self Portrait Experience

The real power of photography emerges when reality is presented in a way that the audience can believe that what is captured by the camera exists in reality. Spanish photographer Cristina Nuñez is interested in uniting opposites. Putting together people who are apparently very different and from different times. She tries to abridge her connections and put forward a dialogue with her ancestors and says, "A picture (Self Portrait Experience) of myself naked in bed, close to that of my ancestors (female), became a way to explain the history of women, how we women have changed, how our life has changed in the last century, and at the same time, there are similarities."

It is about women's liberation she says. Women from the past had bodies like her, and they could have become artists, lawyers, politicians, if they had had the opportunity and the freedom. She explains her portraits, "In my portraits, I want to capture my deep relationship to the subject; I want to see myself in them. I want them to see me and give me their vulnerability, so that I can express their strength."

As a child Cristina always felt invisible. She always wanted people's attention. During her teens the craving for attention led her to do drugs. "I was an addict for five years, until my dad told me that he didn't want to see me anymore if I didn't quit drugs. I quit then, but my self-esteem was very low and I was tremendously confused. All the problems that had made me an addict were still there." In 1986 she met an Italian photographer and moved to Milan. With him she discovered the power of the camera, and immediately turned the lens to herself. That first experience with the camera changed her life forever. And that was the beginning of her remarkable story - Self Portrait Experience.

She believes vanity is the first step towards self-knowledge, and further adds, "As an artist, you have to go deep into your path, without caring what others say. What's important is that you go deep into yourself, only then can your work become universal." She also adds that

if we stay in the surface then it's too self-indulgent, because it cannot relate to others. There's no vulnerability in the surface.

Jannatul Mawa- Close Distance

Jannatul Mawa, a Bangladeshi photographer tries to break the "spatial taboo, more precisely class taboo in urban middle class homes." She may place two women from two different social class in a single frame, house owner and maid. She explains: "Through my work I want to explore the possibility of creating bonds of intimacy among women sitting in the same sofa who, according to dominant norms, are unequal, which we ourselves internalise."

Mawa brings, through her text, the historical perspective and shows that despite the introduction of wage labour by the British and even after achieving independence from the British colonial rule and the Pakistani occupation force, no minimum wage has been fixed by the government for those in domestic service (full time, part time), nor weekly holidays, nor working hours per day, particularly for those working full time. There is no public discourse around this issue either, she adds.

But the question remains: can her work break the age old taboos? She believes that the class distinctions are deeply embedded and it is not that easy to erase it. Instead the work is a process where she tries to explain the matter profoundly. So her work runs through the invisible boundaries between classes, which are simultaneously physical and ideological. She says, "Usually, we do not sit with our house help on the same sofa. Spatially we are very close, in the sense that we inhabit the same space, but due to deep class divisions we prefer to ignore their existence altogether." Through her work she would like to reflect on domestic relationships, though many people think it as 'natural' she terms it as social and historical relationships.

How can a photographer survive in this era of competition? Mawa agrees that it is not easy. She explains that in Bangladesh photographers mostly depend on wedding photography and INGOs (International Non-Government Organisations). Those who are lucky enough can get INGOs' assignments but most photographers are not that fortunate because of different issues like lack of communication and the absence of a proper portfolio. She says, "It is hard to survive in a highly expensive city like Dhaka. You have to have four hands to earn and survive. But I believe photographers have to be smart enough to know how to get work and how to present their work to the world."

Maria Kapajeva- Interiors

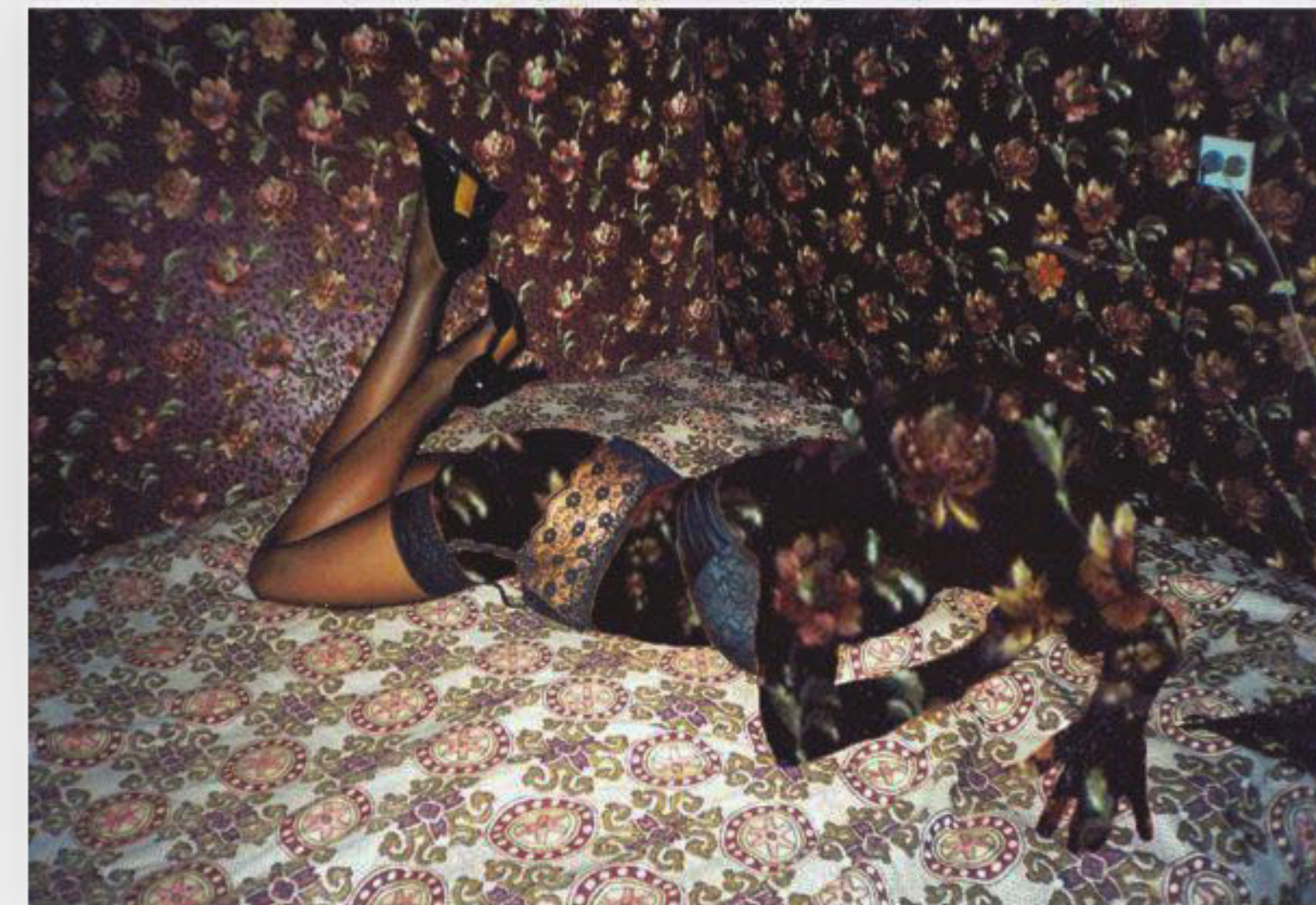
"Am I taking photographs of an existing reality, or creating my own world, so real but nonexistent?" Noted Latvian conceptual photographer

Misha Gordin asks an indispensable question on conceptual photography, terming it as a higher form of artistic expression that places photography on the level of painting, poetry, music and sculpture. Maria Kapajeva's conceptual work 'Interiors' presents an extra dimension of physical presence and beneath the characters lie another person; we can never achieve the keys behind the mystery.

Today all images are manipulated to a certain degree. But we want the photograph we view to reflect reality. Like paintings and music, Maria Kapajeva's photography also follows the process where living images can directly communicate to the audience in a magnetic language of feeling.

It was during her first project when she decided to use someone else's images. Almost accidentally she found this collection of vernacular photographs on the Internet. They grabbed her attention by recognisable and typically flat interiors from post-Soviet territories. At the same time, they arose questions such as who took these images and what for. She couldn't find any definite answer but wanted to do something about these images because of their reciprocal combination of intimacy and directness. She experimented on Photoshop, trying to find ways to demonstrate these two qualities of images.

When she started to research on the subject matter, she found a few important texts written in the 1970s by feminist writers about commoditisation of women. She thinks the situation has not changed much, maybe even becoming worse through stereotypes of how a



Interiors by Maria Kapajeva.

woman should look and act as shown in advertisements, the television and music shows, cinema or printed media. She quotes a British writer called Natasha Walter, who writes in her celebrated book Living Dolls (2010), "Young women are encouraged to see their sexual allure as their primary passport to success." It resembles with ideas of a Slovene theorist Renata Salecl who talks about a celebration of "a choice we all as individuals have in capitalism, but, also we often fail to notice that actually our choice is highly influenced by the society in which we live."

Kapajeva thinks images are an observation or questions of how the Western ideas of choice and commoditisation of women meet in the reality of post-Soviet territories. The easily recognised sexual poses these women are borrowed from a Western media which had a massive impact on post-Soviet mass media in the 1990s. She says, "I think it is a bit irony or conflict between where and how they are photographed. By covering naked parts of their bodies, I unconsciously cover or protect them, I guess, but keep the postures readable for the viewers."

She believes that today more and more women study photography and many women are involved in photography who curate, edit, publish, teach and photograph. But she adds, "I have to admit that there are still issues as women are less represented in art museums or in art markets when compared to male photographers."

Together with Professor Anna Fox and Professor Karen Knorr, Maria is doing research on women in photography. Now they are in the process of organising a conference titled Fast Forward: Women in Photography at Tate Modern Museum in November 2015, which aims at looking at these issues with international perspectives and to see what work and research have been done so far.

Alexandra Serrano-- Between Finger And Thumb

Sigmund Freud's essay on 'screen memories' was a primary tool that helped French photographer Alexandra Serrano to enable her project Between Finger and Thumb. In that essay Freud explains that a child's memory develops when they are around six in a narrative pattern, which is temporally connected. This suggests that many of the childhood memories we recall as adults are not memories, but rather constructions of our unconscious. What we remember of our childhood years are fragments, vivid details that our unconscious embellishes and transforms. And in this project Serrano tries to reconnect with her birthplace. It is more like a memoir, a diary of past days.

She started this series when she was living in the UK. Before starting to shoot, she went through a long stage of research which involved reading old diaries, old and recent family albums, letters and postcards that were sent to Serrano and her family. She went to her childhood home in France. All this material Proust's 'Madeleine' helped her photographic journey. She says, "My body is in these rooms again, the objects that adorn them revived in me visions and related sensations. I methodically wrote down each and every memory that arose to my mind. Although some were relevant, the majority of them seemed disconnected, meaningless and absurd."

Through semi fictional narratives she tries to recontextualise her fragmented memories by giving more meaning through photography.

The whole series is presented with very little text in each image. But forming metaphors and visual allegories in photographs evoke lost feelings and past events of her childhood.

Unlike master photographer Bresson, she does very little street photography. Her images are rarely taken on the move, on the contrary, they are static. The still life photographs of Between Finger and Thumb were all meticulously composed beforehand. She explains, "I drew sketches for each composition. Although some images bear human presence, these are passive and inanimate thus resembling other objects than humans."

She believes that photography is equally challenging for both women and men, at least in France. Her work deal a lot with intimacy and therefore it is with great precaution that she must approach others. It is all about building a relationship that will enable trust and respect. She says, "I believe that when dealing with certain delicate subject matters, being a woman has actually been an advantage."

Andrea Diefenbach-- AIDS in Odessa

Most of the time German photographer Andrea Diefenbach only waits and watches what is happening. She is always aware about the existing light and colours that gives her image a different tone and sets an iconic signature. She says, "I am not a photographer who thinks much. This is all happening rather unconsciously. Often, we meet for the first time without a camera. And then I hang around, I go where they go, we talk and from time to time I take pictures."

When Diefenbach heard about the HIV epidemic in Ukraine, she immediately knew that she wanted to go there. She says, "I wasn't thinking about aesthetics and visual language a lot, I only knew that I wanted to draw the picture about the whole epidemic in only one city and with only a few people."

She tried to get to know HIV-positive people who were not in contact with NGOs because most people were not getting to know them, trying to understand them or spend time with them.

She was more interested in telling stories, trying to explain them through pictures. She says, "In Odessa, I wanted to give faces and voices to the human beings counted in and covered by the many dry statistics about the flow of migrants and remittances."

Being a mother, she thinks photography is the most challenging job for women when compared to men, as she says, "For me the only thing is to juggle between being the mother I want to be and the photographer I'd like to be. I think for most men this is easier. And as for the challenges, I really think it always depends on the subject; in some cases it can be easier to be a woman and in others, it can be the other way around. It's good to think about it in advance."