

PHOTOGRAPHY AND FEMINIST ISSUES:
JULIA MARGARET CAMERON'S POLITICS OF GENDER

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ABSTRACT

Starting from a methodological perspective indebted to the ideas established in feminist and gender studies, this essay aims to enhance the role and presence of photography in women's practices as an affirmation of their autonomy and as a tool for identity and performance. And while this is a well-established assumption regarding the work of women artists involved in militant feminism, the same cannot be said for women who have sensed its potential to transgress codes and norms, even outside the territory of feminism proper. In this sense, the events surrounding the origins of photography are particularly interesting: the essay analyses the figure of the Victorian woman photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who, while among the very few women to have been historicised, offers new insights and meaning from a feminist reading.

Keywords: Women photographers, feminist aesthetics, politics of gender, Julia Margaret Cameron

PHOTOGRAPHY AS FEMALE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Regardless of social and cultural contexts, reclaiming an autonomous space in relation to a dimension that is completely dominated by male identity meant women had to work on a feminist rewriting of history¹. This idea was reiterated again recently by the two French scholars Luce Lebart and Marie Robert in an ambitious project recounting a world history of women photographers who explicitly stated that they were part of the feminist reinterpretation process that has been going on in the history of photography for nearly 40 years².

¹ E. Lewis, *Photography. A Feminist History*, Hachette, London 2021, p. 13.

² L. Lebart, M. Robert (éd. par), *Une histoire mondiale des femmes photographes*, Les Éditions Textuel, Paris 2020; C. Bouveresse, *Les femmes photographes*, Actes Sud, Paris 2020, p. 12. A concise but effective excursus on the critical fortunes of women's photography can be found in U. Pohlmann, *Elle vient, la nouvelle femme photographe!*, in G. Cogeval et al. (éd. par), *Qui a peur des femmes photographes? 1839-1945*, Hazan, Paris 2015, pp. 276-287.



To put this sabotaging of the system into practice, women started from the observation of what was closest to them and more immediately researchable, that which their existential condition and their repressed desires were reflected in: family ties, daily rituals, autobiographical examination, the search for identity, what was attainable and therefore domestic, for environments, things and people. «Longtemps assignées par les historiens aux rôles de muses (...) c'est aussi parce qu'elles furent socialement cantonnées à la sphère privée que les femmes se spécialisèrent longtemps dans certains genres photographiques, confortant l'idée d'un art féminin: photocollages, *tableaux vivants*» and genre scenes pertaining to the domestic or marital realm, self-portrait and staged representations of themselves³. Certainly, at least in the so-called Western World, between the second half of the 19th century and the Second World War, albeit with cultural, political and economic distinctions, there was the common denominator of an almost total exclusion of women (and those who did not recognise themselves in the heteronormativity of power) from the hegemonic positions of the social system. In this sense, one can count on the ideal sharing that women experienced regarding the insignificance of their social and cultural role and their insignificant presence within the artistic dimension: a sharing of marginalised status that is the reason for a fundamental reflection on why photography was precisely identified as the most suitable tool for the need for first-person narratives.

After all, photography has always been a privileged vehicle for gathering autobiographical, personal and first-person narrative needs, as has occurred whenever art and the creative process have been inextricably mixed with the existential dimension and pressing psychological needs. And so, as Griselda Pollock argued, women's autobiographies (and we can include here what was realised through photography) always take the form of a «political project» whenever the individual perspective proves capable of conveying historical and social needs that can be expressed in a collective and shared action⁴. This is why, referring to the feminist art of the Neo-avant-gardes, Carla Subrizi points out a path that we believe also applies to women artists who experimented with new ways of expressing their identity and existential needs between the second half of the 19th and the early 20th century: if art was a tool that women artists used both to change the world and to condition/express their own lives, this was practised both with traditional tools such as drawing, sculpture and painting, and with new media and extra-pictorial languages such as performance, photography, cinema and installations. For women artists, producing art and participating in politics was an existential and aesthetic condition, a psychological necessity and a social commitment that allowed them to bring their demands back to the centre and emerge from the margins of history⁵.

FEMINISM AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Today, as part of a growing interest in the photographic production of women, fostered internationally by the progressive expansion of Gender and Feminist Studies⁶, the process of viewing photographic images

³ M. Robert, *Une longue tradition de discrédit*, in L. Lebart, M. Robert, cit., pp. 19-20.

⁴ G. Pollock, *The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories*, in Id. (ed. by), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, Routledge, London-New York 1996, pp. 3-21, p. 6.

⁵ To focus this argument, see: b. hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, South End Press, Boston 1984; C. Subrizi, *Azioni che cambiano il mondo. Donne, arte e politiche dello sguardo*, Postmedia books, Milano 2012, p. 10.

⁶ On the general topic of art and feminism see: R. Parker, G. Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1981; W. Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, Thames and Hudson, London 1990; G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the History of Art*, Routledge, London-New York 1988; H. Robinson, *Feminism Art Theory: An Anthology, 1968-2000*, Blackwell, Oxford 2001; H. Reckitt, *Art and Feminism*, Phaidon, London 2001; A. Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, London 2003; C. Gonnard, É. Lebovici, *Femmes Artistes/Artistes Femmes: Paris*,

from a feminist perspective has been consolidated, even when these were not produced for this purpose or with such explicit objectives. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau wrote, when the concept of the woman artist became central to artistic discourse, i.e. from the late 1960s, precisely concurrent with the rise of feminism in political discourse, the theme of the woman photographer became recurrent in art history and theory studies and reflections⁷.

In order to be able to support this idea of the anticipation of feminist practices in women's art between the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, I share the perspective and assumptions adopted by the American scholar Claire Raymond in her essay entitled *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics* in which she identifies a need for feminism in the work of various women photographers belonging to different historical periods, artistic currents and above all different cultures and societies⁸. First, Raymond does not evade a discussion on the use of the term "woman" in the context of the recent reinterpretation and revision of the positions expressed by Judith Butler in her famous 1990 essay entitled *Gender Trouble*⁹. Here, referring to Butler's questioning of the concept of "woman" within her theory of gender performativity, i.e. as an illusory category based only on linguistic habits (but also to the criticism that such a white, bourgeois and Western view has received from feminist thought)¹⁰, Raymond makes a fluid and conscious use of it, using social and historical categories that should be dismantled and rewritten. Since this political and historical objective has not yet been achieved, it must be used pointing out its limitation and partiality, adopting it whenever one is confronted with subjectivities that have experienced sexist oppression. The inadequacy of words and traditional language is felt most acutely when we use the category of woman photographer to define artists whose works have portrayed experiences of lesbian homosexuality (as will be the case for the French Surrealist Claude Cahun). We will do so by prioritising artistic creativity as a vehicle for negotiating gender issues, whether they are framed within the more traditional man-woman binary opposition or rather take the form of a decidedly transversal, multiform and non-binary dialectic. As Raymond argues, feminism's only way to combat sexist oppression is to create other images and other visual discourses¹¹. Thus, by using the word «feminist», Raymond specifies that she is not only referring to active, explicit and militant experiences¹², but rather that she is interested in an implicit and potential feminism, ideal and theoretical, which has one of its most important references in the positions of the African American scholar bell hooks¹³. With bell hooks, and with Claire Raymond, we may say that any action (and not merely any declaration) can be deemed as feminist within which feminism itself is «advocated» in the

de 1880 à nos jours, Hazan, Paris 2007; A. Kokoli, *Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2008; A. Jones, *Seeing Differently. A History and Theory of Identification in Visual Arts*, Routledge, London 2012; T. Dekel, *Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2013; E. Heartney, H. Posner, N. Princenthal, S. Scott, *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art*, Prestel, New York 2013; H. Robinson, M.E. Buszek (ed. by), *A Companion to Feminist Art*, John Wiley & Sons, New York 2019.

⁷ A. Solomon-Godeau, *Sous le prisme de l'identité sexuelle: un regard sur les femmes photographes*, in G. Cogeval et al. (éd. par), cit., p. 15.

⁸ C. Raymond, *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics*, Routledge, New York 2017.

⁹ F. Muzzarelli, *Fotografia, estetica femminista e pratiche identitarie*, in C. Casero (a cura di), *Fotografia e femminismo nell'Italia degli anni Settanta. Rispeschiamento, indagine critica e testimonianza*, Postmedia books, Milano 2021.

¹⁰ Claire Raymond has her references in Teresa De Lauretis and Monique Wittig (T. De Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign 2007, pp. 72-84; M. Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, Beacon Press, Boston 1992).

¹¹ C. Raymond, cit., p. 4.

¹² If the role that photography played in the feminist struggles of the 1970s needs no further explanation, as a general reference on the relationship between photography and feminism one can see the already-cited catalogue by Emma Lewis.

¹³ See b. hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, South End Press, Cambridge 2000 and the already mentioned *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*.

sense of claimed, defended, supported, i.e. that there is a way of looking at the practices of photography, little investigated until a few decades ago, which identifies feminist aesthetics as its common thread. In her essay, Raymond then suggests starting again from the images to understand what they can say beyond their appearance. What one must look for, adopting a different vision and a non-sanctioned gaze, is how far from an image can be able to «carry feminist aesthetics», i.e. to introduce points of view and suggest images capable of counteracting patriarchal domination, of breaking the habit of one-sided thinking and thus being political forces of resistance¹⁴.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR EMANCIPATION AND RESISTANCE

This is done by absolutely avoiding defining other categories, constructing new paradigms or canons, but rather by using photographs to break away from visual customs, to give voice and visibility to a world that would have remained on the margins, crushed and even trivialised. Instead, on the one hand the question of women's history, which tells of their almost total marginalisation from the structures and institutions of power as well as from cultural and artistic relevancy as far as the ambitions of female artists and photographers are concerned, must be addressed and taken on. On the other hand, critical and aesthetic interpretations of their work must be proposed that verify the existence of poetics that are sometimes shared, and whose historical condition of marginalisation has stimulated and made urgent. A sharing that will not impact all women photographers, nor absolutely all of their production. Thus, not a vision or poetics embodied in an absolute value that derives from being women, but the verification of what in the images, given the historical and cultural contexts that produced them, can spin the thread of a different narrative of the world. The different narrative is a feminist vision given every time that being female has been an obstacle, every time (even better) that one has experienced oppression for one's gender identity and decided to make it the message of the images themselves. If this was the case, and if this passed into the images produced, then the practice of photography as feminist action became political action and resistance, as «A feminist aesthetic subverts social patterns of domination»¹⁵. And because as Emma Lewis summarises well, in feminist discourse performing in front of a camera means revealing one's mental and psychological experience of inhabiting the body¹⁶. Or, to put it another way, «...an image can *work* for feminism without having been *made for feminism*»¹⁷. If, therefore, there is not just one feminism but rather diverse and fluid feminisms, and if what is important becomes the action (for us, photography) and not just the declaration of intent, then feminist photographs (even more and even better than feminist photographers) have existed (and exist) outside of militancy and defined historicisation. What is crucial is that there is opposition to a dominant monolithic, one-directional view of gender roles, gender identity and gender desires. An opposition to a sexist view of relationships and the world, a political statement. In this sense, then, one can verify what Amelia Jones calls a «seeing differently»: a gendered gaze that, woven into the fabric of the images, is common to the practice of some women photographers. Always, of course, considering the different historical, social and cultural contexts and conditions in which they operated, and above all the different oppressions and conditions of resistance through which each experienced their feminism. In the face of

¹⁴ C. Raymond, cit., pp. 1-4.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 8.

¹⁶ E. Lewis, cit., p. 111.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 133.

these differences, their photographs proposed a different vision, a subversion of codes, a non-stereotypical narrative. They reappropriated a narrative that traditionally did not see them as protagonists, but only passive figures. This theoretical approach is also shared by Emma Lewis, who clarifies how in the history of photography feminism evolved and changed so much over time that the definition of feminist in each context and historical period can be conflicting or simply anachronistic when compared to the status of other women at different times and in different situations, yet potentially always feminist¹⁸.

For more on how the history of photography and the history of women have travelled in parallel, both shifting from marginality to the system and subsequent paradoxical centrality, we refer to a comprehensive bibliography on the subject¹⁹. Here it is sufficient to recall the concept that underlies our reasoning, namely that it is from this enforced marginality, endowed however precisely for this reason with the possibility of unpredictable action and freedom, that women were able to tune into the potential for transgression and opposition to the dominant system they lived and acted in. A historical and cultural marginalisation that, once sabotaged to give women back their attention and centrality, finally turned into a reclaiming of the role that they had not been able to have up to that point, showing that in reality they had always been there, but they did not have a voice or a chance to tell their stories.

Indeed, from the second half of the 19th century onwards, i.e. from when photography became commercial and widespread, the fact that they did not feel represented with the image of submission and subordination that history had drawn for them meant that a certain number of women used the new photographic medium as an instrument of protest and resistance. In fact, the rejection of identification with marginality found an outlet against the invisibility history had relegated them to in photographic practices.

WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS AS ARCHIVISTS OF FAMILY MEMORIES

Self-portraits²⁰, family album photography, the domestic portrait and diary writing, traditionally considered to be women's activities, i.e. amateurish and second-class, especially represented the territory of fantastic escapism and the concretisation of imagination that everyday life regularly censored for them. Carol Armstrong called the women amateur photographers who curated and memorialised their families «The archivists of family photography»²¹. And it is precisely this characteristic of being private and individual that allowed this type of activity to be labelled as the exercise of amateur creativity, insignificant and extraneous to the history of art. But, as is well known, in the artistic poetics of the 1990s the dimensions of the private and the individual were largely reassessed, and thanks to this a re-examination of women's artistic exercises when they also remained in their historical and social contexts as private exercises without overt artistic ambitions that their time barred from the outset, becomes not only possible but indeed the

¹⁸ E. Lewis, cit., p. 10.

¹⁹ On the reconstruction of the history of women and photography, see also: A. Tucker, *The Woman's Eye*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1973; M. Mann and A. Noggle (ed. by), *Women of photography: An Historical Survey*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco 1975; N. Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, Abbeville Press, New York 1994; C. Sullivan, *Women Photographers*, Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York 1994; O. Laß-Gonzales, L. Lippard, *Defining Eye: Women Photographers of the 20th Century: Selections from the Helen Kornblum Collection*, Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis 1997; B. Friedewald, *Women Photographers from Julia Margaret Cameron to Cindy Sherman*, Prestel, Munich-London-New York 2014.

²⁰ M. Beckers, E. Moortgat, *Autoportrait, mise en scène de soi et identité sexuelle*, in G. Cogeval et al. (éd. par), cit., pp. 172-189.

²¹ C. Armstrong, *From Clementina to Käsebier: The Photographic Attainment of the "Lady Amateur"*, in "October", 91, Winter 2000, p. 103 (pp. 101-139). On this topic see also G. Seiberling, *Amateurs, Photography, and the Mid-Victorian Imagination*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986.

occasion for an enlightening re-examination²². Because while it is true that from the outset women have shared a destiny of complementarity to the established systems of power with photography, patriarchal for the former and artistic for the latter, it is also true that from this secondary position they have been able to identify another idea of creativity with greater freedom of action. A possibility that was offered to them precisely by that margin in which women participated in the public, central debate on art, thus being able to glimpse and experience photography in its purest conceptuality: an identity and performative tool well before the Duchampian revolution made such a hypothesis even thinkable. Again, in the aforementioned article on amateurism in women's photography, Carol Armstrong reread Roland Barthes's positions in *Camera chiara*, recalling that concepts such as the «blind field», but also the French scholar's evident sympathy in this 1980 text for the punctum rather than the studium²³, were affected by his departure from the dominant discourse on photography in favour of «other» photography²⁴. Armstrong speculated that in this «other» and non-mainstream photography Barthes would certainly have welcomed the work of amateur women photographers such as Lady Clementina Hawarden and Julia Margaret Cameron: against the canon of great and famous artists, against established art history, against the glorified masters in museums, against photography as a medium for the pure exercise of virtuosity and the supremacy of technique exercised by professionals²⁵. In fact, photography, thanks to which the body and gesture regained an aesthetic dignity that had been obliterated for too long in Western culture (as McLuhan taught)²⁶, offered itself in its exemplary capacity to directly and immediately involve and stimulate the desire for escape and performative experience of those who found themselves on the margins of the official art system²⁷. Photography, the «aesthetic medium par excellence» as Renato Barilli defined it²⁸, was adopted by women who did not at all identify with the image of the feminine that tradition had hitherto predisposed for them. By turning to photography, they activated strategies of self-figuration, interpreting them as original and previously unimagined possibilities of constructing their new psychological and existential reality. Thus, marginality was rewarded by the possibility of instinctively adhering to the experimentation of photographic conceptuality much earlier than the official art system would have allowed, and at a historical and cultural moment in which artists and photographers were still required to have precise technical and formal skills (as the pictorialist currents of the mid-19th and early 20th century imposed on photographers who wanted to enter the art system). It was only when the 20th-century revolution, and that of Duchamp above all, called into question the very notion of Art and Artist, proposing a path different from painting, freed from technique and the exclusive formal and compositional perspective of images, that photography was able to begin to express its identity autonomously and explicitly, freeing it from the pictorial dimension and painting, and thus transgressing the artistic paradigms that until then had been unquestionable. In 1977 Jean Clair clearly indicated this elective affinity between the photographic and the ready-made, crediting the ready-made

²² C. Marra, *Fotografia e pittura nel Novecento (e oltre)*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2012, pp. 256-261.

²³ R. Barthes, *La camera chiara. Nota sulla fotografia*, trad. it. di R. Guidieri, Einaudi, Torino 1980.

²⁴ C. Armstrong, *From Clementina to Käsebier*, cit., pp. 109-110.

²⁵ To go deeper into the History of this Victorian woman photographer see C. Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 1995 and C. Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 1999; F. Muzzarelli, *Il corpo e l'azione. Donne e fotografia tra otto e novecento*, Atlante, Bologna 2007.

²⁶ M. McLuhan, *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, trad. it. di E. Capriolo, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1967, p. 94.

²⁷ On the photographic act as an aesthetic and performative practice, see the classic P. Dubois, *L'atto fotografico*, trad. it. di B. Valli, QuattroVenti, Urbino 1996.

²⁸ R. Barilli, *Informale oggetto comportamento*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1979, vol. II, p. 143.

with eliminating the hand from the artistic process («ils ont, du processus artistique, éliminé la main»), as they are not made, they are chosen («Ils sont choisis, tout faits»), and then clearly indicating that in this lay the fact that they approach photography («qu'ils se rapprochent de la photographie»)²⁹. But this idea, which officially insinuated itself into 20th-century art thanks to the provocation of the ready-made as a work of art that the French Dadaist proposed from 1913 onwards, had already passed into certain autobiographical and feminist practices that gave vent to the desire for creativity and at the same time for feminist vindication and resistance. If the aesthetic principle no longer passes through the material production of the work but instead resides in the ideas and the creative project, as indeed 20th-century art would come to definitively sanction, then the obligatory presence of the author-creator-producer that had been a pillar of art until the Duchampian and conceptual revolution had already been dismantled. A series of experiences in areas marginal to official art, in the lives and amateurish imaginations of 19th-century female world, had taken that road in ways that were often naive yet original and innovative. That the early conceptual experimentations of the photographic medium (which passes from the use of photography more than from, or in addition to, the production of photographs themselves), especially in its autobiographical, identity and imaginary implications, overlapped with one of the most radical cultural changes ever, one brought about by the feminist revolution, is something that appears to be non-coincidental.

JULIA MARGARET CAMERON AND THE “WINDOW OF THE SOUL”

At this point of the argument, centred on the relationship between women and photography, it is worth mentioning the role of Julia Margaret Cameron, who is perhaps the only 19th-century woman photographer whose work has hardly been forgotten in photography history textbooks, as if her inclusion could have justified the apparent complete disregard for the presence of so many other women in the history of the medium³⁰. Julia Margaret Cameron, who was first acknowledged thanks to the research of Helmut Gernsheim³¹, is especially famous because she produced a lot of portraits and also images, in 1875, to illustrate an edition of Lord Tennyson's *Idylls* (in which Carol Armstrong, however, identified a «gender aspect»)³².

Although portraiture is the photographic genre most characteristic of Cameron's work, it is important to reinterpret her practice as a deeply subjective and individual narrative – as a woman and photographer – expressed in an autobiographical sublimation that is easily appreciated in her portraits. It is enough to recall that the subjects portrayed by Cameron were friends, relatives, servants, or at most passers-by near her home in Freshwater Bay, and with some insistence made to pose for her during long sittings in which, having lost all documentary and circumstantial intent, the photographic experience became a behavioural and conceptual exercise³³. Women above all, transformed into true actresses, played other lives and identi-

²⁹ J. Clair, *Duchamp et la photographie*, Chêne, Paris 1977, p. 66.

³⁰ K. A. Hoving, “*Flashing thro' the Gloom*”: Julia Margaret Cameron's ‘Eccentricity’, in “History of Photography”, 27/1, 2003, pp. 45-59.

³¹ H. Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron. Her Life and Photographic Work*, Fountain Press, London 1948. Julia Margaret Cameron wrote an exciting diary-testimony of her work as a photographer, the *Annals of My Glass House*, a text written in 1874 then published in 1889. For a selected bibliography and a complete list of works see: M. Weiss, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Photographs to electrify you with delight and startle the world*, Mack, London 2015.

³² C. Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843-1875*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1998, pp. 362-363. See also: C. Armstrong, *Cupid's Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography*, in “October”, 76, Spring 1996, pp. 114-141.

³³ G. Ovenden (ed. by), *A Victorian Album: Julia Margaret Cameron and Her Circle*, Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, London 1975.

ties, such as the Madonna, Rachel, Daphne or Beatrice Cenci. It was in fact the women's faces and bodies that first suggested the possibility of a *mise-en-scène* in front of the photographic apparatus. Women were suited to the creation of a new photographic identity, to being immortalised in a state of absolute, solitary psychological and moral idealisation. Then – although to a numerically lesser extent – male characters also entered Cameron's world of make-believe: Merlin, King Arthur, Lancelot or King David. For all of them, the English photographer set up marvellous imaginary worlds in the rooms of her home, populated by figures that photography allowed to be reborn into new lives. Cameron's world – her passions and fantasies – drew on the Bible, George Eliot, Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Pre-Raphaelite painting, classical art, theatre and medieval and chivalric literature. How could she have given form, flesh and life to these dreams, to these heroes and saints, had she not known and mastered the secrets of photography? It was enough to surrender to the inspiration suggested by the faces, to open the imaginary trunk of all she had read, seen and heard, and then to stage costumed performances before the camera's eye, at which point the magic found its own time and space.

Julia's desire to photograph anyone with an interesting face quickly became a kind of legend that spread throughout Freshwater and beyond. When she felt she had to exalt the intellectual greatness of those who posed for her, Cameron made a special effort to enhance their idealisation, aided by a very distinctive focus, the so-called "Rembrandt effects": «When men of that kind are before my lens, my whole soul devotes itself to doing them justice, faithfully recording the greatness of the inner man beyond the features of the outer man»³⁴. But what to her was a highly personal way of expressing an original poetics, to her contemporaries and colleagues (including the English photographer Henry Peach Robinson) was simply a symptom of her technical incompetence (even called «sloppy»), her lack of skill, her amateurism, or perhaps even clear signs of visual impairment³⁵. In truth, Cameron herself said she did not believe in «conventional photographic topography», and moreover, «what is focus and who has the right to say what focus is the legitimate focus?»³⁶. It is hard to fault her when she lucidly declared: «when focusing and coming to something which, to my eye, was very beautiful, I stopped there instead of screwing on the lens to the more definite focus which all other photographers insist upon»³⁷. Stubborn and undeterred by criticism, Cameron kept photographing anyone who would submit to her lens, allowing her to peer into their «window of the soul»³⁸.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A GENDERED PERFORMANCE

The posing sessions Cameron subjected her subjects to were considered almost infernal for their duration, but the need for long exposure times, besides being a constraint imposed by the materials of the time, seems more like an interesting behavioural dimension. Another great interpreter of photography, Diane Arbus,

³⁴ J.M. Cameron, *Annals of My Glass House*, an autobiographical piece written in 1874 and published in 1889, reproduced in H. Gernsheim, *Storia della fotografia. 1850-1880. L'età del collodio*, collana diretta da D. Palazzoli, Electa, Milano 1987, p. 210.

³⁵ Beyond Cameron's contemporaries, many 20th-century critics and historians of photography also attempted to explain her soft-focus effects (some with technical arguments, others with more contrived or fanciful elaborations) including Roger Fry, Colin Ford, Helmut Gernsheim and Beaumont Newhall.

³⁶ From a letter of 31 December 1864 reproduced in H. Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work*, cit., p. 17. For further information on Cameron's photographic technique, see also: H. Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work*, cit., pp. 69-76 and L. Springer and M. Weiss, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Arresting Beauty*, Thames and Hudson, London 2023, pp. 11-12.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 181.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 15.

was known for establishing a relationship of complicity and intimacy with the *freaks* she photographed. To achieve this kind of rapport, Arbus tried to put them at ease, inviting them to pose unhurriedly with «the stiff composure of a Victorian dignitary being photographed in the studio by Julia Margaret Cameron»³⁹ and encouraging them to be complicit in what was happening, convinced that «self-revelation is a continuous, evenly distributed process»⁴⁰. Likewise, Cameron chose people with whom she could easily connect and give free rein to her imagination. In the *Annals of My Glass House* she stated: «...from the first moment I handled my lens with a tender ardour, and it has become to me as a living thing, with voice and memory and creative vigour»⁴¹. The long posing sessions on Cameron's photographic sets reveal a behavioural stance that highlights their aesthetic and conceptual nature, since perhaps even more than the idea of the image she was creating, the real source of excitement lay in those long minutes of waiting, of gazes, of frozen postures, of costumes imaginatively reconstructed and adapted to the bodies and historical periods to be portrayed. The emotion was being behind the lens, studying the artificial, contrived reality that stood before her in minute detail, knowing that for those brief moments before the shot fantasy was credible, the dream incarnate, the false turned true. All of it took place within extremely confined and distinctly domestic spaces: the repurposed chicken coop, the coal cellar, the greenhouse. In these and only these spaces Cameron managed to bring to life entire pages, verses and images of poetry, theatre, religion and myth. As Antonella Russo also recalls⁴², the interior was a classic topos of the Victorian era and the late 19th-century bourgeoisie. Thus, Cameron learned to juggle domestic chores and this indomitable adult passion for photography, among “deadly” and poisonous chemicals, fake backdrops and theatrical costumes, not to mention the everyday tasks of household life.

Even the issue of falseness and artificiality – inevitably evoked by her images at a time when photography was primarily about truth and documentation – serves as a key to reading her philosophy of photography in gendered terms. As Francesca Alinovi has already observed⁴³, artifice and falseness worked perfectly in her ability to create a conscious waking dream, almost anticipating a kitsch, postmodern aesthetic still little explored in art language. Alinovi herself included Julia Margaret Cameron among the first illuminating examples of photographic illusionism, alongside the fathers of photomontage, Robinson and Rejlander; the voyeur-photographer Lewis Carroll; the first adventurers of exotic photography; the metaphysical visions of Baron von Gloeden; and the retro stylings of Baron De Meyer. Photography allowed her this harmless madness of a dream made credible, and Cameron certainly did not hesitate to seize the new technical tool to do what she could hardly have enjoyed before her time: transforming the little theatrical scenes she staged at home into full-fledged performances that photography validated and preserved – but entirely on her own terms – marking her originality against the more philologically accurate set reconstructions sought by her contemporaries. In this way, setting herself apart from the critical tradition on Cameron's work, Alinovi

³⁹ S. Sontag, *Sulla fotografia*, trad. it. di E. Capriolo, Einaudi, Torino 1978, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 33. For a comparison on slow shutter speeds between the photography of Julia Margaret Cameron and that of Diane Arbus see F. Muzzarelli, *Il tempo lento della fotografia e l'emersione della maschera*, in “Pianob. Arti e culture visive”, 1/1, 2016, pp. 213-231.

⁴¹ Reproduced in H. Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work*, cit., p. 180.

⁴² A. Russo, *La nozione di unheimlich nelle immagini di donne fotografe*, in N. Leonardi (a cura di), *L'altra metà dello sguardo*, Agorà, Torino 2001, pp. 26-27.

⁴³ Equally vital, even years later, is the contribution made by Francesca Alinovi to the reconstruction of Julia Margaret Cameron's image, in the essay she co-authored with Claudio Marra: *La fotografia. Illusione o rivelazione?*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1981. It is precisely the figure and original reading offered by Alinovi that allows us to rediscover the undeniable allure of photographic illusionism in Cameron's work.

had already defined the series of tableaux vivants for Tennyson's poem as Cameron's masterpiece⁴⁴. Thus, she introduced a significant interpretive rift from the more official and important voices that had analysed Cameron's photography up to that point. For Beaumont Newhall, «When she was not trying to interpret great personalities, her work lost itself in sentimentality, and echoed painting»⁴⁵. Meanwhile, in the aforementioned monograph on Cameron, Helmut Gernsheim deemed this series virtually ridiculous and *The Passing of Arthur* a pathetic image ruined by the overcrowding of figures within the cramped space of the Glass House, and by the presence of rather naive details like the wooden ceiling beams, which Cameron attempted to hide on the negative using moonlight effects.

CAMERON'S POLITICS OF FOCUS

By contrast, a feminist reading of the relationship between women and photography finds original insights in Cameron's work⁴⁶. Such is the case of the interpretation offered by scholar Lindsay Smith in her essay *The Politics of Focus*⁴⁷. Lindsay Smith focuses her interpretation on Cameron's famous Rembrandt-like effects, namely the soft focus, not only confirming (obviously) how conscious this choice was and not the result of technical inexperience or alleged visual defects, as was long claimed at the time. Above all, however, the scholar proposes the suggestive hypothesis that Cameron's politics of focus took the form of a voluntary politics of gender: by rejecting the precise vision and rigours of geometric perspectives as the cornerstones of the visual representations of a 19th-century photography still totally dominated by the relationship with painting, Cameron carried out her isolated but courageous revolt against that dominant style, and for this was subjected to offence, calumny and irony in her time. On the contrary, «...Cameron's politics of focus should be read as undermining dominant modes of seeing, and theories of representation that underpin the whole patriarchal structure of Victorian society»⁴⁸.

Julia Margaret Cameron as a modern performer, then, a definition which, according to Carol Mavor⁴⁹, embraces both an existential dimension (her eccentric demeanour, wearing red velvet in summer, greeting friends at the station with a teacup in hand, the heavy odour of chemicals she exuded rather than perfumes, her indiscriminate inclusion in albums of portraits of the Prince of Prussia alongside those of her gardener) and a more professional dimension, as a great director who adjusted costumes and hairstyles, arranged sets and props, and directed and simultaneously embedded herself in her artistic productions. This view is shared by those who maintain that Cameron's personality was «theatrically larger than life»⁵⁰. Julia Margaret Cameron as a contradictory woman, capable of «subverting the image of the Victorian bourgeois woman...

⁴⁴ More recently, Sylvia Wolf too identifies the strength of Cameron's images in their theatrical excesses; S. Wolf, *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1998, p. 53.

⁴⁵ B. Newhall, *Storia della fotografia*, trad. it. di L. Lovisetti Fuà, Einaudi, Torino 1984, p. 114.

⁴⁶ Regarding Julia Margaret Cameron's position on the "Woman Question" in her time see: A. McCauley, *Brides of Men and Brides of Art. The 'Woman Question' of the 1860s and the Photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron*, in "Études photographiques", 28, November 2011, pp. 6-50.

⁴⁷ L. Smith, *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children, and Nineteenth-century Photography*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1998, pp. 24-34. Among other feminist interpretations of Cameron's pictures see: T. Hager, *The Quest for the Lost Story: feminist reading of Julia Margaret Cameron's "Mountain Nymph Sweet Liberty"*, in "Women's History Review", 27/2, 2018, pp. 199-220.

⁴⁸ L. Smith, *The Politics of Focus*, cit., p. 32.

⁴⁹ C. Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*, cit., p. 45.

⁵⁰ J. Cox, C. Ford (ed. by), *Julia Margaret Cameron. The Complete Photographs*, Thames & Hudson, London 2003, p. 11, trad. it. nostra.

even if she was not consciously critiquing that image»⁵¹. Thanks to a life lived performatively, and to the performances she crafted through photography, Cameron's models were never mere objects under her control. Through the reciprocal relationship she could spark with her favourite sitters, they became conscious, engaged partners in her choices and challenges rather than docile instruments.

And if in the case of Cameron's photographic work one considers – as might also be said of Diane Arbus – that her whole portrait theory amounts to an extended autobiography, then as Abigail Solomon-Godeau commented: «...il me semble que la pratique photographique féminine qui invite le plus à détecter dans l'image une subjectivité marquée par le genre serait l'autoportrait, ou plus précisément l'autoreprésentation»⁵².

Yet, it was said, looking at oneself and one's own world has long been considered one of the elements to prove the artistic and cultural limitations of women, fit only for the narcissistic-domestic exercise of the personal and private. Today, however, the overall reassessment of those values of the private and the individual leads us to look at those expressions as an anticipation of what 20th-century art and aesthetics would later bring to global attention (such as the interweaving of diaries and photographs as exercises in feminism and resistance), but which for that time still concerned content that was too visionary and pioneering.

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⁵¹ Ivi, p. 47.

⁵² A. Solomon-Godeau, *Sous le prisme de l'identité sexuelle: un regard sur les femmes photographes*, in G. Cogeval et al. (éd. par), cit., p. 21.

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