Museums and gender coding: photography and the concerned agency of pictures through digital exhibition spaces

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Museum history is a story of choices. Of physical and conceptual constraints that have been shaping, year by year, and century after century, the vision of art history we collectively abide by today. Museums buildings have been, and are, designed and organized based on ideological paradigms, themselves contributing to influence a wide range of shared cultural stances, spanning from physical, behavioral and identitarian dimensions of human life. The drastic shift that has shaken museums and all other ideological structures in the last decades, the digital revolution, is calling for a rewrite, or at least a review, of the ways in which the museological cultural organization of knowledge exercises its power on individuals (Foucault, 1969). The *dispositif* (Agamben, 2006) which operates the preservation and dissemination of knowledge is a dramatically new one: its lines of visibility, enunciation, power and subjectivation (Deleuze, 1989, pp. 3-6) are yet to be fully identified and addressed.

Needless to say, old habits are hard to kill: the ideological stances which have been behind the western construction of knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992) are the foundation on which cultural and categorical choices are being structured in the digital realm (Demeshkova, 2021; Balbi, Calise, 2023). Yet the platform society (van Dijke, Poell, De Wall, 2019) which mediates this evolution, has its own multiple and ever changing systemic and technological dynamics. Ones which can, potentially, amplify and empower the dissemination of specific biases (Bode, 2020; Craig, 2021). Within this picture, efforts to decolonize and degenderize museological contents and productions, especially with reference to research projects and exhibitions that are being designed in the digital era, need to be understood in relation to the situational apparatuses (Eugeni, 2017) that promote them. New and *enlightened* proposals cannot in themself testify to a paradigmatic shift in so far as they are advertised and experienced in an environment which embodies and perpe-

 DOI: 10.6092/issn.2531-9876/19587

trates the character of a nineteenth century visual culture. Spurring from the interplay between structural elements and cultural content, as it will be discussed further in this article with reference to Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, is a ritualistic process which visitors partake into, becoming exposed, more or less consciously, to a set of beliefs and values.

The following analysis begins by offering a reading of Duncan's ritualistic account, presenting the key contributions of her work and trying to identify which elements highlighted in her theory need to be kept in mind to see how civilizing rituals are transported and exercised in the digital museum ecosystem. If, based on Duncan's premises, there is a dangerous dynamic taking place within the workings of museum environments, which are the factors that need to be looked at to ensure that a radical and comprehensive undertaking of the patriarchal viewpoint is put in practice in a museum exhibition, when a feminist perspective is declared as the center of the project? Through the text, an account of the way the museum environment has been changing in light of the digital revolution will be offered, in order to show that the apparatus that needs to be checked for gender equal standards is way broader before the digital revolution. With specific reference to the photography museum, which offers a unique field of enquiry within the museum sector. Lastly, the exhibition *Close Enough. New Perspectives from 12 Women Photographers of Magnum* will be taken into consideration, across its analog and digital settings, as a case study where the prospective offered can be applied. The project, which directly tries to overcome a western, male dominated and colonial photographic gaze towards reality, risks to be delivered within a setting which is however still heavily embedded in its traditional value system and ritual scheme, further powered by the digital technologies it operates through. The artworks exhibited, furthermore, while surely making an effort in creating a new discourse around women both as authors and subjects of the photographs, still abide to a heavily dictated narrative of how one should work and who should be depicted in order to be eligible for the museum-temple show. Ultimately, it seems that attempts to resignify the discourse around women through museum settings have to be wary of easy thematic choices, and conscious of the layered experiential dimensions that the digital realm has brought about.

The analog trademarks of museum gender ritualized coding

In 1995, working from her previous researches *The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual* and *The Universal Survey Museum*, and building on a series of well established authors who had written about the mystic aura which surrounds the experience of art (Hazlitt, 1816, 1824; Gilman, 1918; Alpers, 1991; Adams, 1954) Carol Duncan published *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. This book, destined to shift the perception on the way museum experiences ritually enforce culturally gendered behaviors and stigmas, represents, to this day, a uniquely bright insight into the way museums operate. Introducing the work, she writes:

> In this study, I consider art museums neither as neutral sheltering spaces for objects nor primarily as products of architectural design. Like the traditional temples and palaces they so often emulate, art museums are complex entities in which both art and architecture are parts of a larger whole. I propose to treat this ensemble like a script or score - or better, a dramatic field. That is, I see the totality of the museum as a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind, whether or not actual visitors would describe it as such (and whether or not they are prepared to do so) (Duncan, 1995, pp. 1-2).

What the author emphasizes, in this passage, is how the traditional narratives which address museums in the scientific literature usually focus on two parallel, yet often intertwined, visions of the museum: the building, on the one hand, and the collection, on the other. These two elements, historically recognized to be structural characters of the museum identity (Pomian, 2020, p. 16) are often chosen as guiding lines of inquiry in the investigation of museum dynamics and consequences. The force of Duncan's argument, however, resides in the way she discloses how the dialectic between the two gives rise to an experiential process, on the side of the visitor, which is even more important than the collection or the building itself, because of its mystic and yet rigorous performative account. She proceeds:

> From this perspective, art museums appear as environments structured around specific ritual scenarios [...]. My intent in this is not to argue a theory of ritual or a universal definition of it in the manner of comparative anthropology. Nor is my primary interest to establish museum-going as something akin to older ritual situations, although there *are* formal parallels to which I shall point. Rather, I am concerned with the way art museums offer up values and beliefs - about social, sexual and political identity - in the form of vivid and direct experience. If, in the

chapters that follow, I insist on the existence of museum rituals, it is because I believe that a museum's central meanings, its meanings *as a museum,* are structured through its ritual (*Ibidem*).

What is important to emphasize, the author specifies, is not a universal character or process which aspires to place museums together with other parallel institutions and environments; yet the fact that as different as they might be museums all share a disposition to offer and explicit values and beliefs. These, as she concludes, vary based on the institution which, «as a form of public space, [...] constitutes an arena in which a community may test, examine, and imaginatively live both older truths and possibilities for new ones» (p. 133).

While Duncan's merit is surely in having outlined the existence of this framework, the most powerful contribution of her work is to have described the functioning of the modern art museum with reference to its status as «a politically charged, classist, and gendered repository of the values of elite high culture» (Serchuk, 1998, p.126). The narrative of art history which is dictated by curatorial installations, combined with the subjects of the paintings exposed – celebrated as allegedly unique turning points in the male artistic strive towards abstraction and liberation – end up delivering a museological experience which is not only designed exclusively for men. It also dictates a specific set of values which actively defines female identity through heavily patriarchal eyes.

With her work, Duncan helped highlight a specific line of action within museum ideology, one that hadn't yet been identified by other authors which had written on the political and cultural influence which museums had been exercising for centuries, disguised within an aura of intellectual rationalism and unquestionable truths[1] (Bennett, 1995; Crimp, 1993). It is, in fact, only with the awareness that the museological and art historical domains have been enforcing gendered art visions that new readings of art become possible. Allowing for the imagination of a different critical understanding of *untouchable* masterpieces and artists, in light of a declared female viewpoint (Pollock, 1999). Envisioning new canons and new virtual museums, where feminist perspectives can be central (Pollock,

[1] Another exceptional undertaking of the patriarchal museological narrative, in this case devoted to the analysis of the Natural History Museum of New York is represented by Donna Haraway's 1984 *Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936*, «Social Text», no. 11, pp. 20-64, followed by her 1989 work *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Routledge, London.

2007) and artworks can renegotiate their visibility against overreaching architectural spaces (Krauss, 1990).
Museums of the twenty-first century, as Duncan had herself anticipated by the end of her work, and Pollock vividly visualized, are spaces where the discussions about gender and discrimination have become an active part of institutional organization and programming. Today, cultural institutions are way more prone to debate their colonizing and patriarchal past, often bargaining their curatorial choices and policies in a cultural scenario which is constantly changing and becoming more inclusive. In the words of Clair Bishop, they «mobilize the world of visual production to inspire the necessity of standing on the right side of history» (2013, p. 6). As Tony Bennett wrote, «the conflict between the theoretical universalism of the museum's discursive space and its actual articulation to existing social hierarchies has been, and continues to be, responsible for fuelling a politicization of the museum as it has been called on to reverse these exclusionary and hierarchical effects» (1995, p. 46). Yet, needless to say, equality in cultural representation and programming is far from reached, even though there is much more space for debate, and diversity than in the late nineties. Contributing to this openness is the digital environment within which institutions operate: a technological revolution which is forcing old institutions to adapt to new standards (Perry, 2010; Black, 2020). Multiplying, thanks to digital ecosystems, the virtual spaces where feminist narratives can be displayed. In this scenario, the museum ritual embarks on a new journey, one which intertwines with the contemporary mediascape.

Digital rituals and the experience of bias in online museum settings

The digital environment has today deeply affected the museum context and experience. This phenomena can be seen, amongst others, from two main perspectives, which can help clarify how the ritualizing process that can be responsible for the enforcement of a value system and cultural canon in museums is an extremely complex one, which deals with digital media in a variety of ways.
Firstly, one aspect to take into account is that digital technologies have fully intertwined with our everyday life, structurally defining a new experiential environment which is cognitively embedded, embodied, enacted and extended in a digital mediascape (Newen *et al.*, 2018). This entails that museums themselves have had to face a new way of being and ex-

periencing. Human beings are now used to develop their cognitive habits in a space which is actively shaped by media as much as our own consciousness (Fingerhut, 2020, 2021), making it practically and theoretically impossible to design a museological experience that doesn't in some way encounter new technologies[2]. In this sense, the visitor who walks into a museum space brings, with him or herself, an inherent digital dimension, which inevitably links to the experience he or she will be having. In order to fully consider the diverse ways in which the museum experience can partake in the ritualization of the visitors, a full understanding of their digitally engaged cognition needs to be taken into account.

Secondly, the museum itself, by definition a medium with the main task to «transmit information over time» (Henning, 2015, p. 85), functions through the use of a variety of digital technologies, operated by curators, museum professionals and visitors. Museums are using new media in a variety of ways, spanning from digital displays, interactive exhibits, extended reality experiences and a whole range of remotely accessible programmes such as online collections, podcasts, games and streaming channels, social media content and museum spaces recreated entirely in digital settings. With digital technologies playing an important role in helping museum staff ensure object preservation and protection, and remediating heritage online through the creation of new digital products and environments.

Weather one begins from the experiential perspective highlighted by Newen, investigating how we are now used to digitally relate to life, or one focuses on museums' programming and engagement with new media, it is unquestionable that the digitalscape is deeply impacting museum life. This, inevitably, comes to play an important part also in the ritualizing understanding of museum environments. If in the analog museum one had to look only at museum buildings and structures on the one hand, and at the artworks' narrative on the other, in order to identify the components from which the ritualizing process emerges, the contempo-

[2] Surely it is possible to envision, and experience, the scenario of an analog museum visit, as it might have been designed in the nineteenth century, with the visitor simply walking through the museum halls and looking at the artwork exhibited. This, in fact, is still the case in many contemporary museums. Yet in the twenty first century it is unlikely that the visitor in question has not received a newsletter on the exhibition he or she is seeing via email, or liked a post on any social media of the museum, or even exclude that he or she will take a picture of the paintings exhibited, and send it so someone, or store it on a digital memory. Making digital technologies part of the experiential setting, whether this is part of the curatorial plan or not.

rary scenario is far more complicated. The ideological, biased and historically rooted positions that operate behind the museum life are today mediated through a technological fiber which is in itself layered through problematic, yet at times difficult to identify, steps. The algorithmic governmentality (Rouvroy, 2016a, 2016b) that presides over and across curatorial choices acts as a necessary and yet often unregulated variable in the making of our digital and cultural selves (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Contributing to characterize an environment where data, and its capitalistic use (Sadowski, 2019), is red through the politicized computational eyes of artificial intelligence (Crawford, 2021; Campolo 2020). Creating a scenario in which patriarchal stands and viewpoints are embedded within the technological domains in ways that are hard to segment and identify.
An example of the layered, biased and culturally embedded nature of digital infrastructure within museum settings can be the use of algorithms and software in art collections management. Firstly, algorithms may be designed using biased data sets or with implicit biases that perpetuate social and cultural biases (Demeshkova, 2021). If algorithms used for image recognition or facial recognition are analyzed, it appears that they may have difficulties in accurately recognizing people of color or may misgender individuals who do not conform to binary gender norms[3]. Secondly, algorithms may perpetuate bias by reinforcing existing cultural norms and values. For instance, an algorithm may prioritize certain types of art or artists over others, perpetuating the marginalization of underrepresented groups.
With reference to this occurrence, the Google Arts & Culture platform is a well known example, where «the dominance of images from capital cities and provinces surrounding capital cities in [...] collections also contribute to our understanding of the aggregator as a corpus that inherits imperial bias of the printed era» (p. 22). Thirdly, software may be developed and maintained by a homogenous group of people, leading to the reinforcement of their biases in the design and implementation of algorithms[4]. As a result, it is crucial for museums to critically evaluate the use

[3] B. Ciecko, *AI sees what? The good, the bad and the ugly of machine vision for museum collections,* 2020 retrieved at https://mw20.museweb.net/paper/ai-sees-what-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-of-machine-vision-for-museum-collections/ consulted on the 30th of March, 2023.

[4] Evidently, this is the case with the geographic and economic center of most big tech industries being located in the western world, entailing a very western cultural background as the premise for an otherwise intended as deeply neutral and unbiased technological identity.

of algorithms and software in their management processes, and to prioritize diversity, inclusivity and fairness (Wilkinson *et al*, 2016) in the development and implementation of these technologies.

While the one just described represents a single instance across the multiple dynamics that can be found in the digitized cultural ecosystem, it serves to highlight how, overall, the presence of digital media seems to design a more intertwined environment where bias can be coded through a series of agents. Which, collectively, contribute to set a new and complex ritualistic space.

Further, it is important to notice that the user engagement enabled by digital technologies, far from being an inescapable coercive net, can also be seen as a way to open museum content and experiences to new personalized narratives. Since the first uses of more interactive experiences in museum settings (Barry, 2001), it has been argued that these kinds of practices allow users to «develop new forms of relating with traditional art and cultural objects, and they can interact and even co-produce» (Seebach, 2018, p.15) content. Cultural meaning becomes open to new interpretations and narratives once it is shared in a more public and open space, where visitors are able to engage through their own viewpoints and discuss with one another, thus undermining the historically vertical museum narrative and offering a more horizontal one.

Ultimately, it seems that digitized museum environments, both in the form of their online spaces and in the shape of interactive designed exhibits, create a new setting in which things can go *both ways*. On the one hand perpetrate a biased western understanding of reality through an amplified and unclear computationally layered world, on the other finally free individual – both artistic and non – voices in the cultural discourse. And, of course, a multitude of options in the middle.

Meanwhile, the visitor navigating the phygital museological space embarks on a new transforming journey. One where ideological positions may not be as clearly stated – this will vary case by case – but are equally strongly embedded in the experiential environment proposed. And even more, mimic cognitive habits and dynamics which create a stronger proximity between life inside and outside the museum, making the museum journey somehow more relevant in terms of its impact on our belief systems. It permeates through our everyday understanding of the world thanks to the naturalized status of technology (Eugeni, 2015, pp. 46-47), contributing to the development of our cultural identities. The ritual we partake into is mediated through a more complex and layered

series of spaces and contents, where the steps that guide us through the endorsement of the ideological premises of the museums we visit are more subtly intertwined with the mediascape of our everyday reality.

The Photography museum as a unique ritual setting for unique works of art

Within the above framework, the analysis offered in this research assesses a case study which belongs to a subgroup of museums: photography museums. While these types of museums partake in the set of dynamics discussed above, both in their analogue history and in their digital rebirth, they do stand in a unique position in the visual field. Parallely, photographs have some individual properties which make them a peculiar object of study in the art field. Before delving into the analysis of the case study, a few aspects of the unique character of photography museums and photographs, in relation to the digital transition, must be specified.

Photography museums can be considered unique types of museums for several reasons. Firstly, photography is a relatively new medium compared to other forms of art, which means that the history of photography and the development of photographic techniques and technologies, can be studied in a relatively short time frame, offering very contemporary collections and building (Moschovi, 2020). Secondly, photography museums often house large collections of photographs that document important moments in history, as well as the social and cultural changes that have taken place over time. These collections can provide valuable insights into the ways in which photography has been used to shape our understanding of the world and our place in it (Edwards, Lien, 2016). Additionally, photography museums often present exhibitions that showcase contemporary photographers and their works, providing an opportunity to explore emerging trends and styles in the medium (Stylianou-Lambert, Stylianou, 2014). Finally, photography museums are often highly engaged with the public, offering a range of educational programs and events that promote photography as a means of creative expression and encourage public engagement with the medium (Werner, 2021).

For these reasons, they represent ideal exhibition spaces where ideological stances can be discussed and assessed, as they are apt in dealing with the contemporary, with society, with history. A feminist account, therefore, can ideally benefit from a more open and mobile display prac-

tice, when hosted in a photography museum. In the digital ecosystem, their modern status serves as an ideal testing ground, where more contemporary buildings, prone to deal with societal transformation and critique, can be home to a positive transformation.

Photographs themselves, moreover, occupy a special role in today's visual history (Clark, 1997) and in museum practices. As it has been widely argued, there is a unique connection between photographs' cultural value and their exhibition value (Benjamin, 1935, p.14), where the second one contributes to define the first one in the era of technical reproduction (Maiorino, 2022, p. 211). Strengthening the relationship between photographs and their museological display (Rubessi, 2022), as well as the connection between the experience inside and outside the museum. Photographs, more than other types of media, represent an artform that crosses institutional borders. In the contemporary visual field, they are highly accessible and circulate widely, thanks to the ubiquity of digital cameras and social media platforms that enable people to capture and share them easily. As a result, photographs have become a common language for visual communication (Pinotti, Somaini, 2016), allowing people to share their experiences and perspectives with others in a highly visual and engaging way, across a wide range of contexts, from personal snapshots to commercial advertising, journalism, and art. Further, as the visual studies literature has widely discussed (Mitchell, 2006; Gell, 1998), photographs, together with the wider group of images they belong to, embody a unique kind of agency and a whole set of desires and wills, which can be retraced both in the past and in the present of our culture. Moreover, they are highly accessible and familiar to audiences, making them more relatable and engaging than other forms of art. This accessibility also means that photographs can be used to explore a wide range of themes and issues, from social and political concerns to personal experiences and perspectives. Lastly, they are highly versatile and can be presented in a variety of ways, from small prints to large-scale installations, which allows for a range of curatorial approaches and interpretations.

In all these ways, photographs occupy a unique place in today's museum culture, serving as a powerful means of expression, communication, and documentation that plays an important role in shaping our understanding of the world. Their inherent approachability and their capacity to belong both inside and outside the museum makes them an ideal medium for the discussion here assessed. One which, by definition, stands in a

more open discussion with individuals, their social and cultural claims, and the ways in which these claims can be exhibited within museum spaces. The impact that the digital revolution has had on the art system, and over many art forms, escalates when photography is in question, as the digital ecosystem fuels the realm of photography in many complex ways. Therefore, assessing the ways in which ritualistic processes vary with museum settings in light of the digital revolution becomes somewhat more compelling, and evident, when analyzing a photography exhibition, inside a photography museum.

The International Center of Photography's claim to feminist museology, online and offline

The ICP is the International Center of Photography, a New York based institution which, as the website advertises, «is the world's leading institution dedicated to photography and visual culture»[5]. It is a fairly recent museum, founded in 1972 by the Hungarian photographer, naturalized American, Cornell Capa[6]. The aim of this organization is to champion *concerned photography*, which is represented by socially and politically charged artists whose photographs have the goal to educate and change the world. Investing in their work and exhibiting their projects means actively addressing both the status of inequality and injustice around the world and the agency that pictures hold in the cultural scenario, their power to affect the status of things.
Differently from old and traditional museums, which need to implement change and address historically established biased habits and practices before they can claim to be tackling a more equal approach to art, the ICP can proudly state to have been founded with a modernizing view. It was created with the declared intent to overcome an ideological western dominated narrative of the world through photography. This is also shown through a very active effort towards education and learning, with the museum having an education office open everyday, delivering both

[5] The museum's website is accessible at the following link https://www.icp.org/ accessed on the 8th of march 2023.
[6] The photographer's original name was Kornél Friedmann, born in Budapest in 1918. Brother of the famous author Robert Capa, he widely contributed to the photographic reportages of *Life* magazine, and was an active member of the photographic agency Magnum Photos. For a published account of his professional philosophy read *The Concerned Philosopher*, authored by him and published in 1968.

online and onsite classes, catering for a variety of audiences at every level with part-time and full-time courses, programs and workshops[7].
From a digital technology perspective, the museum seems up to date yet not overcrowded with innovations. The visit on site still heavily resembles a traditional museum visit, interactive technologies tend to be scarce as tools through which the cultural experience is mediated, unless the exhibition showcases audiovisual content, which is not always the case. Photographs are hung and exhibited recalling a traditional white cube aesthetic (O'Doherty, 1976), although the industrial layout of the sealings and the shifting organization of the space allows for a modular and dynamic setting (fig. 1).

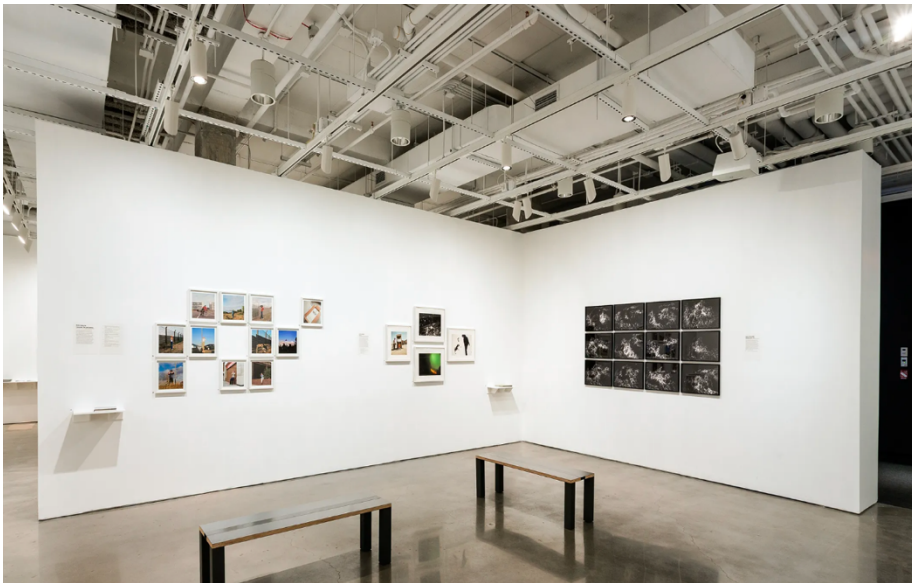

Fig. 1 – Exhibition setting, International Center of Photography, photograph by John Halpern

Information on the images is shared through labels and captions located on the white walls next to the artworks, at times integrated through physical booklets and pamphlets, placed on small stands around the rooms. Insofar as the museum physical setting is concerned, it seems that the space does not actively try to reverse the idealized transforma-

[7] All information regarding education programs can be found at the link https://www.icp.org/school accessed on the 1st of April 2023.

tive experience that traditional museums have tried to design through their rhetorical narrative or the art encounter. The still mysticism that has been designed in the heterotopic space of the museum (Foucault, 1986), in order to *sell* the illusion of a place that could potentially hold all the knowledge in the world, seems to habit these museum halls as well.

Moving on to the digital offer of the museum, and its content showcased in the digital sphere, we can observe a fairly digitally active institution. The ICP has a series of social media profiles – instagram has almost 400.000 followers – a YouTube channel with a diverse range of contents, the possibility to search through the collection online. Visiting the museum website, however, it is possible to identify a series of categorical and interface choices which problematize the originally advertised progressive stance. When trying to search through the collection using the 'Artist' as an organizing category, the website offers 9 first main authors, before giving the possibility of clicking on the 'View all' button. Of these, only 1 is a woman. Looking more closely at the complete list (403 artists), however, around 1 out of 4 of the artists listed are women, showing how the selected list of authors offered to the online visitor when first entering the platform is biased, at least from a numerical standpoint, with reference to the whole archived content. The *digital path* to knowledge offered on the website, therefore, seems to inevitably mimic the same patriarchal walks that traditional museums designed.

Surely, one could rightly argue that the choice of the first 9 names is a curatorial choice made out of cultural and historical decisions of relevance, which should not be fully compromised by feminist stances. Yet the issue here is that it is a choice made within a museum which has openly and actively claimed to want to rewrite those standards and positions, strong of the awareness that within the history of art there are strongly embedded biases.

The other ways to navigate the collection, by grouping digitized items (55.222) through 'Location', 'Media Type', 'Year', 'Genre' tags, also recalls traditional ways of organizing archived images. Which is not in itself problematic, as a more progressive account should not by principle disregard antecedent practices, yet shows a lack of effort in offering a more layered and plural roadmap to the content exhibited. One which actively builds a different kind of *stage* for the visitor's performance, allowing for a new set of values to be learned. The section organized through 'Perspectives', lastly, also does not present revolutionary narratives in terms

of either decolonial or gendered positions. It shows thematic or chronological or author-related focuses, which guide the digital experience.
Through its programming, however, the museum actively claims to want to create a new narrative in terms of the history, and the present, of photography. This is the case of the exhibition run between the 29th of September 2022 and the 9th of January 2023, titled *Close Enough. New Perspectives from 12 Women Photographers of Magnum* (fig. 2). In it:

> Each of the photographers narrates their creative journey, providing vantage points into the extraordinary relationships they create within global situations, communities, and individual subjects. With a title inspired by Magnum cofounder Robert Capa's quote "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough," *Close Enough* presents more than 150 works of art by women., including Sabiha Çimen's explorations of the experiences of young Islamic women in Turkey; Alessandra Sanguinetti's long-term collaboration with the rural Argentinean cousins Guille and Belinda, as they evolve from childhood into adulthood; Bieke Depoorter's multiyear, multiform project Agata, about a young club performer in Paris; and Susan Meiselas' work with women who sought refuge from domestic violence in the Midlands, UK. Female photographers in the exhibition include Olivia Arthur, Myriam Boulos, Sabiha Çimen, Bieke Depoorter, Cristina de Middel, Carolyn Drake, Nanna Heitmann, Susan Meiselas, Hannah Price, Lua Ribeira, Alessandra Sanguinetti, and Newsha Tavakolian. Curated by Charlotte Cotton, the exhibition coincides with the 75th anniversary of Magnum Photos' founding[8].

The project, as it is here plainly explained, seems to associate female authorship to social and political commitment. The first prerogative in order to be chosen for the exhibition is one's gender, rigorously female; the second its however one's social commitment, rigorously strong. The artworks, as is above detailed, are all documenting and portraying socially engaged dynamics: from rural Argentina to the outskirts of Paris, across the Midlands and in Turkey, capturing violated, abused and struggling subjects. Creating a very specific narrative that surrounds the idea of women photographers and their work.
While the curator of the exhibition is a well known female professional[9], the tile seems to echo a distinctively patriarchal stamp. As the above de-

[8] The project description is accessible on the ICP website, at the link https://www.icp.org/exhibitions/close-enough-new-perspectives-from-12-women-photographers-of-magnum accessed on the 9th of March, 2023.
[9] On the project website page is offered the biography of the curator of the exhibition, which reads: "Charlotte Cotton is a curator, writer and creative consultant who has ex-

scription declares, the title *Close Enough* is inspired by a quote from Robert Capa, who associated the quality of a picture, its *goodness*, with the proximity – understood clearly not in a technical and spatial sense, but from an emotional or conceptual perspective – between the work and the reality which in that work is captured. As the museum declares, the 12 photographers showcased in the exhibition are *Close Enough*. They have been praised with the ultimate compliment, almost as if the *male gaze* (Mulvey, 1975) embodied by western museum's positions had placed on them the final, and ultimate, entitled look.

Which are, in the end, the identities that are best confirmed throughout the ritualization process of this exhibition? Going back to Duncan's words we expect them to be «those who are best prepared to perform its ritual – those who are most able to respond to its various cues – are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms» (1995, p.8).

It appears that these are people ready to abide by a somewhat moralizing version of women photographers, one which directly associates 'goodness' with 'social engagement'. Surely with reference to Duncan's critique of the museum as a space where women are excluded from the museum narrative, the International Center of Photography, and this exhibition, seem to satisfy the claim for a more gender balanced narrative and organization. Especially if compared to «the women of modern art» which «regardless of who their real-life models were, have little identity other than their sexuality and availability, and, often, their low social status» (p. 111) historically portrayed in museums. Yet the new «objects of adoration in that place consecrated to the holy ends of art» (p. 14) are inscribed in a different yet equally strict narrative. On the one hand photographers who are legitimized by their civic engagement, on the other hand the portrayed subjects, crystallized in their pain and struggles. While the works presented in the exhibition showcased the power of photography to explore social and cultural issues and to prompt reflection on our own identities and relationships to the world around us, it is

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plored photographic culture for over 25 years. She has held positions including curator of photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, head of programming at The Photographers' Gallery in London, curator and head of the Wallis Annenberg Department of Photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and curator-in-residence at Katonah Museum of Art, NY. She has also held positions at ICP and California Museum of Photography, Riverside. Her book, The Photograph as Contemporary Art, is published in more than ten languages and has been a key text in charting the rise of photography as an undisputed art form in the 21st century. The fourth edition was published in September 2020".

unclear the extent to which they embrace the ritualizing power of the museum to truly subvert old gendered narratives.

This case is only one example of how contemporary museum projects can be tested against a complex theoretical framework which accounts for both analog and digital ideological ritualistic patterns. Hopefully, it can serve to highlight some interesting points regarding the ways in which museums, across their building, their digital spaces and their curatorial projects, can care and cater towards a more gender equal cultural future. As the *Close Enough* exhibition highlights, the deconstruction of male dominated narratives and experiences, in the digital museum era, calls for a layered and complex undertaking. Which has to take into account not only the museum architecture and the artworks showcased, but also the whole range of digital spaces and experiences that partake in defying the status of museums today. A museum which does not make an effort to deconstruct its gendered identity in the digital realm, and that does not use digital technologies to embrace a more participatory artistic experience, risks falling back into old patriarchal patterns. Even when advocating, with sincere intentions, the deconstruction of the dominant canon.

Fig. 2 – Photograph of a visitor at the exhibition *Close Enough. New Perspectives from 12 Women Photographers of Magnum* at the International Center of Photography

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