

Performing the Posthuman Subject

BECKS BUTLER TALKS TO VERA RYKLOVA AND FANFA OTAL SIMAL ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE SUBJECT IN THEIR PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICES.



TO UNDERSTAND THE posthuman in the context of photography, we are exploring the artist's ability to examine the human condition through their representation of subject. A photographic image fundamentally helps us to deconstruct and understand its subjects from multiple perspectives. Fanfa Otal Simal uses the camera as a 'second plane', capturing her subjects as they perform in everyday and familiar environments. In contrast, Vera Ryklova enlists the camera as an accomplice in her experiments with identity, where she is present, both as performer and image-maker. Although contrasting in their approaches, both artists primarily deal with the relationship between subject, performance and photography.

Becks Butler: Fanfa, your choice to make pictures with disposable cameras, the color aesthetic and framing style, heighten the viewer's sensorial experience. Can you tell us more about these choices and how the act of photographing is part of the work?

Fanfa Otal Simal: The disposable camera liberated me. It was my solution to achieving realistic portraits. I discovered that these cameras were nothing more than little toys for my subjects. They never feel restrained by them and therefore don't pose. Generally, I don't look through the viewfinder or have the camera by my face. I interact with my subjects when I have them in front of me. This way, I get imperfect and more realistic angles. I am interested in the colours and the light that plastic lenses produce. It gives the pictures a more organic and tactile quality.

BB: You describe the camera as a "second plane" between you and your subject. Throughout your series, 'Cocorro', your father goes in and out of playfully performing, either for you or for the camera. I'm interested in how his awareness of your presence with a camera heightens his multiple identities. Can you elaborate on how this approach affects the performance of subject in your imagery?

FOS: I usually make environmental portraits, and, in this work, I look for unique qualities of the subjects to understand their world and my relationships with them. The portraits become a new form of dialogue and the camera simply registers that in the form of images. I have slowly managed to see my pictures in an objective way. 'Cocorro' began spontaneously two years ago as a way of communicating and developing closeness with my father. He is aware of my presence, but not as an image maker. His behaviours are raw and real. He only performs when he gets tired of me taking pictures, by pulling strange faces. Time is an important element in my projects. I need a routine with my subjects, I need to see them often and not always to take pictures – this is key, as this is what makes us united. The pictures come after. I believe I need to understand each person in their own context, their habitats and everyday environment.

BB: Your edits portray multiple angles of your father in personal and public environments. How do you feel these spaces allude to representation?

FOS: In 'Cocorro', there is a series of photos in which my father is working in the field surrounded by animals and nature. These images transmit physical and mental strength – qualities which also represent his character. However, when he arrives at his house, he relaxes, lets himself go, softens; his whole demeanour becomes more vulnerable. In public spaces, he plays theatrically for other people. All of these traits are locked within the framing of the image and somehow both environment and subject become one, building a greater understanding of my subject.

BB: Vera, how did you come to use yourself as a subject within your work, and how do you decide to represent yourself?

Vera Ryklova: I'd say there have been two phases to this process. The first time I ever held a camera was when I was 15. At that time, I understood the photograph to be reality,

and I photographed literally everything, with no specific concept in mind. Having few photographs of myself (as my family did not own a camera) and wanting to observe my appearance, I photographed my reflections in mirrors. I was merely looking at the world and myself through the camera's lens and I was completely taken by it. Then, when I was studying photography, I used myself as a model for the first time, as a quick solution. Though I did not realise it at the time, this predicted the direction of my current practice. I found it cathartic. That was the turning point. Having said that, I do not necessarily see self-portraiture as my only way of working. But the self is still a subject I want to continue exploring in my work while confronting my emotional state and challenging the issues that strongly occupy my own self, as they define my role in our (post) human society.

BB: Can you discuss your approaches to image-making?

VR: Firstly, I aim for the audience to realise that a photographic image refers to and represents reality. What has been framed in the image is what has been created. Choices about what to include or to exclude from the frame (the audience's view) form the basis of any artwork. I construct the image. It is like a collage. But my 'collages' are created during the process of execution, as I go through multiple experiences, while exploring my subjects. The act of composing happens outside of the frame. In my new work, the places where I execute the work act as props for the creation of the portraits. They assist me in communicating the specific themes I'm exploring.

BB: We spoke about origins as being a driving force in the development of your work. Your photographs layer elements of place, costume and persona – which you describe as 'a combination of things that don't work together'. Can you discuss how these elements may deconstruct the subject or be interpreted by the viewer?

VR: My origins are often associated with Eastern Europe, which has a strong political connotation for me, as the term refers to traces of belonging to a former region in the era of the Iron Curtain, rather than to the actual geographical location of the Czech Republic in post-communist Europe. The misinterpreted stigma associated with my cultural background, I felt, has caused a barrier, which was something that I had the urge to address. And I did, in my project, 'Aesthetic Distance' (2015). Although conflicted by my frustrations, I try to confront them with a sense of humour. I trust the audience recognises this and understands my strategy. For example, the self-portrait, *Untitled #7009* (2015), has earned a comment that it looks like "an American spaceman with a Soviet head". Which quite sums up my lived experience of the Cold War I conveyed in this performance. I observe contradiction in myself, which I think is an inherent human condition that deserves to be embraced. That is what I try to bring to the work too – to understand humans as they are. In my images, I subconsciously layer elements of my past and present, which together build a subject. I wish to provoke the audience to think and get them interested in what has not been disclosed in the frame, to let their own life experiences impact the reading of the work.

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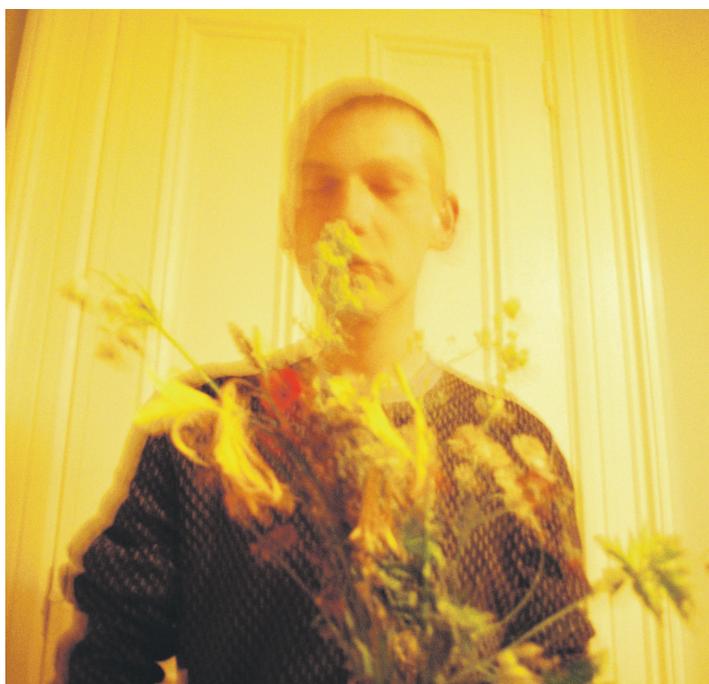
Fanfa Otal Simal is a visual artist based in London.

otalsimal.com

Vera Ryklova is a Dublin-based visual artist, working in lens-based media.

veraryklova.com

This is a continuation of a conversation between the artists which took place on 13 July, as part of the PhotoIreland Festival 2019.



Top: Vera Ryklova, *Untitled #7009*, from 'Aesthetic Distance', 2015, medium format film

Middle: Fanfa Otal Simal, image from 'Cocorro', 2018, 35mm film; courtesy of the artist

Bottom: Becks Butler, *july*, 2018, 35mm film; courtesy of the artist