

Decontractions* of the gaze

On some Tunisian neo-analogue practices

Nothing in *Souffle* calls for the idea of a consecrated art, conforming to the axiomatic of what it should be. If the viewer expects a practice of art photography, with its agreed aesthetic coefficients, it is not necessarily in this way that they should apprehend the works of the three young Tunisian photographers gathered here. It should be said that what the bodies of work exhibited here have in common is that they counteract the expectations of the viewer. In their own way, Souheila Ghorbel, Yasmine Belhassen and Walid Ben Ghezala each practice an indifferent photography, without quality. However, let there be no mistake. Without quality does not mean that their images can be reduced to simple notations in bulk that would form a random sequence, without coordinates. On the contrary: we are looking at photographs whose singular quality lies in the humble attitude they share of not claiming to have any quality. On the one hand, it is true that here we find something of the most common practices of amateur photography: the shoot is not afraid to bring its little share of annoyances, to keep its spontaneity halfway between a relative technical mastery and a voluntary, even playful letting go. On the other hand, it is no less true that this absence or, rather, this bracketing of the quality, raises much more deeply a mode of subjective enunciation, with its own temporality. At the same time, in the case of these young Tunisian photographers, the implication of subjectivity does not slip into established genres. These photos, we have understood, are in no way reportage or testimony. No particular style unites them, much less any distinctive mark. On the other hand, if we afford our gaze the time it takes to read these photos, they reveal unsuspected affinities between these three artists, who each have their own personal approach and courses of action. And if we find ourselves looking at what we could call a generational "decontraction of the gaze", fully assumed, it does not get its meaning from some imaginary sphere that we blow like a bubble. Although they bear the trace of a documental intention, in their own way, these images testify to a point of view, let's say, of a full-fledged sensitivity which resists, in some way, the voluntarism of artistic perception, its transparencies, its codes, as well as its mutations. This is perhaps where the second feature of these practices of analogue photography lies: a synoptic view would tend to show a certain communality of spirit or at least a familial spirit running through several bodies of work, worth of a generational effect among a dozen young Tunisian photographers. With their own possibilities and constraints, these practices that can be described as "neo-analogue" were actually given a prominent place on the contemporary photography scene in Tunisia after 2011. The constraints of the context, where these confidential practices evolve socially in a similarly codified manner, are not entirely different. More precisely, these constraints that a brief sociology is called to examine, could act as a

magnifying glass on the practices in question. On a local scale, the return to the analogue makeshift cameras has, on the one hand, encouraged among amateur photographers a form of sensitivity without artistic pretension, just as it has nourished, on the other hand, an attitude akin to the codes of the “underground” in its way of contrasting clearly with the massive, unbridled democratization of the cult of the digital. But whatever the interest in recalling the context, if this return denotes an obvious logic of retreat, its nature is no less complex and versatile for that, in the measure of a fragile emergence of the medium. The apparent "modesty" of these images is that of, on the one hand, a defective aesthetic that does not care about the light, the framing, the sharpness, but one that allows us to attain, by this very fact, something of a tolerance towards the bad cliché, as if it was necessary to leave things be, not to disturb them. At the same time, this "modesty" speaks of a tacit refusal of the social normativity of the dominant visual productions; and by extension a refusal of a certain formatting of the gaze, by summoning in the shoot other reflexes, which try to release the gaze from its purgatory. This double articulation finds more than one confirmation in the images by Souheila Ghorbel, Yasmine Belhassen and Walid Ben Ghezala. The young photographers of *Souffle* cultivate, using diverse though similar means, a method that consists in maintaining a trembling, like a completely different breathing. Although they evolve in different social universes, in one sense they work on the ground with the means at hand. Without reconnoitring, they move around, camera sometimes in hand, far from the bright lights, and generally allow themselves to be carried away by the gazing time that an analogue or Polaroid camera gives them. On the slope where intuition leads them, the diagonals imprinted with a relaxed interiority prevail over the choice of subject, if in fact there really is a subject.

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English translation by Narjes Torchani

* in the sense of “relaxations”

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