



# CATÓLICA

## ESCOLA DAS ARTES

---

PORTO



# CATÓLICA

## ESCOLA DAS ARTES

---

PORTO

## Abstract

“The women of the cooperative” is a photographic work made up of portraits of thirty-two women who dedicated their lives, or part of THEM, to working in the textile industry. The purpose of this project is to give visibility to a larger group of women, thousands, who for some time had the possibility to support themselves economically, serving as a fundamental pillar for their families with the contribution of a salary that came from long working days in front of a sewing machine with which they created items of clothing for big brands such as Carolina Herrera or Zara.

The number of women, thirty-two, was chosen from a larger group, about a hundred, who were pioneers setting up the first textile factory in Verín.

Through dialogue with them we learn about the ins and outs of the industry, while allowing photography to function as a tool to make a social reality known. At the same time, we investigate the work of other photographers such as Susan Meiselas or Claudia Varejao, whose photographic objectives are similar to those of this project. Of course, their work is also linked to ours by the mere fact of being women photographing women, a fact that may seem banal but is actually a great show of sorority.

Keywords: Textile industry; Working women; Sorority; Admiration; Women photographers; social photography.

# Index

1. Introduction.....	2-3
2. Historical Context.....	3
2.1 Identity factors in the work of "The Women of the Cooperative" .....	3-6
2.2 From the global textile industry to the local textile industry.....	6-7
2.3 The influence of migration on the textile sector in the region of Verín	7-9
2.4 The Cooperative.....	9-10
2.5 Process of work.....	10-11
3. Photography as a tool to highlight the reality of the women of the Cooperative.....	11
3.1 Everyday scenarios of the women of the cooperative.....	12-13
4. The rural world through time and photography. References.....	13-17
5. Sisterhood in photography.....	21-23
5.1 Susan Meiselas.....	23-26
5.2 Cláudia Varejão.....	28-33
6. Practical Work	
6.1 Photographic series.....	34-63
7. Conclusion.....	64-65
8. Bibliography.....	66-67

# Women in the Cooperative

## 1. Introduction

### Women in the Cooperative

At the end of the 70's a small textile industry was born in Verín, which during the following years gave work to a good part of the women of the town and surroundings.

This industry had its starting point in the emigration to Catalonia, where it had already originated years before, while in Galicia smallholding still prevailed. Self-employed seamstresses and tailors moved around the houses or had their small workshops on some premises in the streets of the town, where all was made to measure.

When this industry arrived, imported from Catalonia, the first factories began to be set up.

Here the Cooperative was born, the first place where more than 70 women worked on an assembly line. Their orders came mostly from Roberto Verino, since the designer is also from Verín. Then came Inditex, Purificación García and other big brands whose labour force was at some point in Verín.

Over the years, many more chains (textile factories) were established, spinning off that first Cooperative. These branches reached up to 40 and spread throughout the region, but it was Verín that hosted most of them.

As a result of offshoring, first to Portugal and then to countries in South America and Asia, they all gradually closed, until the last one closed down in 2019.

In Verín there are very few women aged between 50 and 70 who have not dedicated part of their lives to sewing. In A Pousa, my village, we are 32 neighbours and there were even two sewing chains whose workforce exceeded the local population.

This work focuses on the first women who worked in sewing in Verín, it focuses on that Cooperative. It is meant to point out the value of these women, who worked very hard for a long time and who achieved the independence that comes from having their own salary.

This project comprises 32 photographic portraits taken during visits to each of the houses of these women, whom I had previously known of by word of mouth, as well as the sound recorded stories of each of them. It is a project based on admiration and sorority.

## 2. Historical context

### 2.1 Identity factors in the work "The Women of the Cooperative".

Something that I look for in my projects, either purposely or unintentionally is that they are close to me, to my existence, to my surroundings, to what is closest to me. That is why the region of Verín and more generally, Galicia, always has a privileged position in my proposals, either in the audiovisual field, when I record countrymen to produce short films, or in photography, since the protagonists of all my works are people who are close to me or at least to my roots or my culture.

This is due, almost entirely, to the fact that I am trying to defend a culture of which in the last century it was obligatory to be ashamed, as during Franco's dictatorship speaking not only Galician but also Catalan and Basque was prohibited, as well as every single cultural expression regarded as "not Spanish". The transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain was not the product of a big revolution. Franco had educated King Juan Carlos to his liking and likeness, with the conviction that in the future, should he be absent, the country would be a monarchy again but would follow the Francoist model that Juan Carlos would have learned to perfection. That moment came in 1978, after Franco's death, when Juan Carlos was crowned and "democracy" was established.

This period is known as the Transition, which, as its name indicates, was a transition from Franco's regime to a non-dictatorial regime in which power actually continued in the same hands, now made up as democratic so as not to attract attention in Europe, after forty years of dictatorship.

This transition meant that customs based on prejudices typical of the Roman Catholic, Spanish-speaking Francoist regime have been carried over to the present day. This is one of the reasons why the minority cultures in the Spanish territory, namely, Catalan, Basque and Galician (the largest) together with different cultures, languages and dialects throughout the state continue to be persecuted with Spanish and centralist policies that aim to their disappearance. It can be inferred that the prohibitions of the "past" regime still weigh heavily today.

In opposition to this situation, nationalist parties are born, providing a voice to those who feel they must literally live in silence if they do not identify with what is understood as Spanish.

In my family we are Galeguistas<sup>1</sup>. My mother tongue is Galician, spoken by both my closest and extended family. In my adolescence I began to take pride in my land and in being part of it. I understood the implications as an act of self-assertiveness that speaking Galician has today. In the largest cities of the Galician territory the main language is Spanish. In education, although it is mandatory by law to teach a certain percentage of subjects in Galician, in most cases this is not done. At university, the use of Galician is almost non-existent. Speaking Galician is increasingly rare among children and adolescents, and the institutions, governed by the Popular Party, a right-wing organization that defends Spanishness, ignore what for them is not a problem.

When you feel undervalued by a vast majority, your closest ties become more powerful. That is why, being aware of the contempt and undervaluation of the Galician language (being this the pinnacle of our culture), my ties with it grew stronger over the years and, along with my artistic ambitions, the need to vindicate what we are through my work was born. This also includes the rural world, predominant in Galicia, which has always surrounded me, being life in the village and the relationships between its inhabitants some of my great sources of inspiration. It is in the most rural areas, moreover, where the largest number of Galician speakers is concentrated, since our language was pushed back into the shadows, considered inferior to Castilian and only suitable for home matters. Castilian, and not Galician, was the language that served to climb the social ladder and be someone in life. Unfortunately this prejudice has not disappeared yet.

Therefore, my projects are developed in rural areas and have as ultimate objectives the vindication and enhancement of the people who are part of the Galician culture, whether or not they are aware of its potential. So far, the places chosen to develop my works have been the region of Monterrei (Verín is the main town in the region of Monterrei, formed by smaller villages around it), or A Pousa (my village, inhabited by about 30 neighbours. That is where I lived until I was 18 years old and where I return once and again, both because my family lives there and because it is the epicenter of my projects).

In addition to the inspiration I get from the pace of life in the countryside and the interest in the relationships among the people who live there, it is necessary for me

---

<sup>1</sup> "Galicianism" is an intellectual current whose objective is to perpetuate, through active defense and promotion, the culture and identity of Galicia in all its manifestations (language and literature, music, folklore, gastronomy, traditions, etc.).

to be in constant contact with the stories that surround me there. That's why I pay a lot of attention when those around me talk, and if a story catches my attention, I try to record it in as much detail as possible and then continue to get informed about it. In this way, I find topics that are interesting to me and I work on them in whatever way I can. The proximity of the countryside makes it possible to have closer relationships, since as a result of living in very small villages that are very near the town of Verín, we all know someone who knows someone else, and it is easier to contact anyone there. In addition, by sharing acquaintances, there is more trust.

One day, while talking with some neighbours, the subject of the textile industry in the region of Verín came up. It is not a distant topic for us in our own village, happily inhabited by about thirty neighbors. Until 2013 there were two textile factories that had between thirty and fifty employees each. Most of their production was managed by Inditex, Roberto Verino, and other minor brands. I must emphasize that A Pousa is a village that you can go through in a three-second drive, but to a greater or lesser extent sewing chains were spread throughout the region (there were fewer in the villages and more in Verín).

We came to question the starting point of an industry that has now almost completely disappeared, and it was they who told me about the Cooperativa, a group of women who in the late 1970s became part of a small company run by Modesta Rúa, a native of Verín who had emigrated to Catalonia. There she had worked in the textile industry and discovered the prospects of chain work in factories in this particular sector. Due to family circumstances she had to return to Verín and there, in order to apply what she had learned, she decided to set up her own dressmaking workshop, thus laying the foundations of what became the main livelihood of many families in Verín over the course of some thirty years.

Due to the closeness that I have had involuntarily with the textile industry throughout my life, since when I was born the garment workshops in A Pousa were part of the landscape, and many of my neighbors worked there, I decided to delve into the history of Verín's textile industry, whose Cooperative, as I also discovered in that conversation, had been one of the first to work for Amancio Ortega.

My first step in the collection of data was talking to Modesta Rúa, who today continues to run a sewing repair store in the centre of Verín.

We talked about it, she explained to me how it had started and why, and finally I grabbed my camera and took a picture of her. After that meeting it was clear to me that that information would be part of a documentary, and that after that portrait a

photographic project began, a project through which I would discover a network of women who had been part of that first cooperative.

## 2.2 From global to local textile industry

In order to get a closer look at those years in which the textile industry had managed to employ thousands of women in Verín, I decided to record the conversations I had with each of the thirty-two women portrayed. Through their testimonies I managed to give shape to how they carried out their work, where, at what age they had started their careers, how hard it had been and what consequences they had suffered, how many years they had dedicated their lives to the garment industry, what benefits they had obtained from it, and also, when it had happened and what had become of them in the present.

In addition to the testimonies of the protagonists, to make my data more specific, I decided to look for information on the net and fortunately, I came across an article by the Portuguese anthropologist Paula Godinho entitled "Presas por um fio: costureiras de Verín, modalidades da produção têxtil local e trânsitos mundiais" ("Hanging by a thread: seamstresses from Verín, methods of local textile production and global transits").

Paula Godinho is an anthropologist, researcher at the Institute of Contemporary History and associate professor at the Department of Anthropology of the Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, where she is also from. She conducted fieldwork over several years in Portugal, on the border between Portugal and Spain, and in Galicia, on social reproduction, festivals and rituals, resistance and social movements, political uses of memory and heritage practices, processes of emblemization, touristification and commodification of culture, topographies of power, border cultures and diaspora nationalisms. In Galicia, it was the border between Verín and Chaves, the former a Galician village and the latter a Portuguese city, the one chosen to host them, curiously enough.

In 2017 the Anthropology Association of Castilla y León "Michael Kenny" published a set of articles under the title "Reflexiones Rayanas" in which Paula Godinho includes the aforementioned article, "Presas por um fio: costureiras de Verín, modalidades da produção têxtil local e trânsitos mundiais", the result of a research work carried out by the anthropologist in the region of Verín in which, through testimonies of seamstresses, she manages to build a theoretical account of what

happened to the textile industry in Verín from the late 1980s to the devastating present.

In this article, which undoubtedly became an essential reference to develop my work in terms of its theoretical basis, Godinho begins by dealing with the great fortunes of the Spanish state and the world, rankings in which Amancio Ortega, owner of Inditex, has a secure position.

Godinho writes: "according to data from Forbes magazine, three of the five richest people in Spain, in 2014, had their fortune linked to the textile industry, especially clothing. They were thus, Amancio Ortega, the owner of Inditex, with 46 million euros; his daughter, Sandra Ortega Mera, who had inherited her mother's share, and Isak Andic, the owner of Mango, with 4.3 million euros."<sup>2</sup>

In 2015 Ortega's fortune reached up to 62.4 billion euros and at the end of October of that year his fortune became the largest in the world for one morning, ranking second throughout the afternoon.<sup>3</sup>

Godinho focuses on these great fortunes to analyse how they have their roots in local areas ( in this particular case Verín) where the rights and working conditions of workers, especially if they are female workers, are easier to handle at the pleasure and whim of their employer. Thus, these workers become the "gears" that "feed" the capitalist system worldwide. "Thus, I am interested in questioning the modalities of textile production by who makes them possible, at the local level and their relationship with global transits"<sup>4</sup>, describes the anthropologist in her article.

To this end, she decides to focus on the region of Verín in her research, though providing data on the situation of the textile industry at the Galician and world level. This complements the discourse on the specific area and helps to contextualize the situation from the general to the local.

### 2.3 The influence of migration in the textile sector in the region of Verín.

The first signs of a Galician textile industry date back to the 1960s. Before that, clothes, bed linen were made by itinerant seamstresses carrying out house to house visits to those who needed to order some garments. Mostly women, they would visit

---

<sup>2</sup> Godinho, P. C. A. (2017). Presas por um fio: costureiras de Verín, modalidades da produção têxtil local e trânsitos mundiais. In P. Tomé Martín (Ed.), *Reflexiones Rayanas* (Vol. 1º, pp. 103-126). Asociación de Antropología de Castilla y León "Michael Kenny".

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*

customers when they were called, and they would carry out tailor-made, unique work according to the needs of the specific customer. It should be noted that Galician women showed great mastery in their work, many parts of Galicia becoming the birthplaces of great dressmakers.<sup>5</sup>

Advances in dressmaking came when emigration (a constant in the history of Galician people) to more industrialized areas caused thousands of Galician men and women to leave for Catalonia in search of a livelihood at the end of the 1960s. By that time, the textile industry had already been established there for several years and those who found jobs in this sector brought with them their knowledge and, above all, their experience on their return to Galicia.

Some of them, once in Galicia, decided to set up their own factories focused on clothing manufacturing, applying what they had learnt during their emigration. To do so, they had a group of workers who made the garments on their machines, thus increasing the production capacity compared to the system that had been used in previous years.<sup>6</sup>

Modesta Rúa had emigrated to Catalonia at the end of the 1960s because her husband's job as a banker had taken her there. In her adolescence she had learned to sew with a dressmaker in her town, so once in Catalonia she chose the textile branch and began to work. With a great talent for dressmaking, she proved her worth and in later years came to run a workshop of the big firm Pronovias.

For personal reasons, in the mid 70's she had to return to Verín, her homeland. She brought with her a wide experience in the Catalan textile industry and did not hesitate to put it into practice in Verín. This was very favorably influenced by the fact that the internationally renowned fashion designer Roberto Verino's birthplace is also Verín. In fact, Verino makes direct reference to the name of the town.

One of her workers, aware of Modesta's talents, presented her with an idea: to create a cooperative society in which, by bringing together a large group of seamstresses in the region, it would be possible to increase textile production, that is, to start once and for all the industrialization of dressmaking in Verín, taking advantage of Roberto Verino's possibilities.

Roberto Verino and Modesta contacted some women who, like her, had learned to sew with a dressmaker and many others who did not even know how to thread a needle. Together they set up a cooperative society. Each of them contributed with a

---

<sup>5</sup> Godinho, P. C. A. (2017). Presas por um fio: costureiras de Verín, modalidades da produção têxtil local e trânsitos mundiais. In P. Tomé Martín (Ed.), *Reflexiones Rayanas* (Vol. 1º, pp. 103-126). Asociación de Antropología de Castilla y León "Michael Kenny".

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*

fee, which allowed them to join the cooperative, thus gaining access to equipment to develop chain work.

The cooperative started at the beginning of 1978 and for at least 8 years it gave hundreds of women the possibility to learn the trade and also to practice it. They worked for big brands, among which Roberto Verino stood out in the first years and Inditex in the following years Inditex. This cooperative was one of the first garment factories Amancio Ortega counted on at the very beginning of Zara (it opened its first store in 1975 in A Coruña and began to expand around 1983, with 9 stores located in the most prestigious areas of Spain).<sup>7</sup>

Due to the growth of the *fast fashion* trend in the global context, some of the women who were part of the cooperative decided to go their own way, either because they did not agree with the working conditions or because they wanted to trace their own direction and take advantage of the favourable situation regarding their work.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in Verín, in the early 90's, a network of garment workshops began to emerge, reaching more than thirty chains with groups of workers ranging from 5 to 40 in number.

Until 2009, when the big brands began to find it more profitable to outsource their factories to Latin American and Asian countries with even worse working conditions than those offered in a remote village south of Ourense, the average family in Verín was formed by a father working in the construction sector and a mother dedicated to sewing.<sup>9</sup>

There are currently no garment workshops in Verín, as the last one closed down in 2019.

## 2. 4 The cooperative

Thousands of women worked in clothing manufacturing in the region of Verín from the 1980s until the closure of the last workshop in 2016. It is worth noting how they managed to be a fundamental pillar for their family, beyond the effort involved in taking care of the home, contributing economically to their livelihood and helping to improve their family's standard of living.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.inditex.com/es/quienes-somos/nuestra-historiaHome>. (s. f.). Recuperado 27 de octubre de 2022, de <https://www.inditex.com/itxcomweb/en/home>

<sup>8</sup> Testimonios recogidos por la autora

<sup>9</sup> Godinho, P. C. A. (2017). Presas por um fio: costureiras de Verín, modalidades da produção têxtil local e trânsitos mundiais. In P. Tomé Martín (Ed.), *Reflexiones Rayanas* (Vol. 1º, pp. 103-126). Asociación de Antropología de Castilla y León "Michael Kenny".

We are not taking into account, in this research, the working conditions that prevailed at that time in the textile industry of Verín, although we are aware that they were not very favourable. There were no holidays, a salary was agreed on that turned out not to correspond to the real one, the working days were always extended beyond the agreed time... complaints that are repeated in the testimonies collected.

The decision not to go into these issues lies simply in the interest in highlighting the role of these women over the underlying problems. We are aware of and reject them, yet our aim is to approach this in a different way, based on the admiration for all the women who were part of the textile industry.

To be more specific, we focus on the industry that is close to us and which we have been talking about up to this point, the textile industry in the region of Verín. As there were thousands of women who found a job in sewing, our decision has been to limit our scope of work to the first women who set up a textile factory in the form of a sewing workshop in Verín. That is why this work will be focused on the women who were part of the Cooperative founded in 1982 and run by Modesta Rúa.

## 2.5 Process of work

Through the testimony of its chairperson, in October 2020 I accessed an initial list of about 20 women who had been part of the cooperative. I knew some of them as neighbours, so through them and others I met for the first time when I visited their homes, the list grew to 71 in 2022.

Of the 71 on the list, I managed to visit 32. The vast majority of them were unemployed due to the collapse of the textile industry, and a few were doing other jobs that they had got to continue contributing until retirement. A very small group of them are now working in something related to sewing.

During the visits the procedure would always follow the same pattern. I introduced myself, I talked to them about the work I wanted to develop, if they agreed, we talked for a while in front of my recorder and finally, we chose together a place to take a portrait of them standing, looking at the camera.

The testimonies had many similarities, but each one presented some singular characteristics. What was repeated the most was undoubtedly the "pff, that was a long time ago, I can barely remember".

The final group of women interviewed adds up to 32, which is also the number of portraits obtained.

All of them were part of the Cooperative and later, many went on to set up their own workshop or to work in several different workshops over the years.



Fotografías de una fábrica textil en la actualidad. Sabela Souto.

### 3. Photography as a tool to highlight the reality of the women of the cooperative

Through this group of women and using photography as a tool to make their reality known, we intend to admire their work, give recognition to their long working hours, admire their courage to work both inside and outside the home, thank them for having been so strong and above all, make them feel how worthy of high regard they have proven to be.

### 3. 1 Everyday scenarios of the cooperative's women

The front portraits, standing, looking at the camera, try to contextualize the women who forty years ago started an industry that left a great mark on the Verinese society. This contextualization is provided by the backgrounds chosen for them. That is, they were all photographed in the most common space in their daily lives. Thus, most of them, the unemployed ones, are in their homes. The backgrounds we find are their kitchens, their patios, their flowers, their doors, their favorite place in what is now their work: home and family.

Others can be found in their workplaces. Thus, in the portraits there are also gift stores, sewing stores, textile arrangement stores, beverage distributors... Most of them continued to do excellent work in the service sector.

This way, we tried to contextualize the immediate present of these women and also to analyse which of them were able to access new jobs and how many of them did not have that opportunity and had to dedicate their lives to housekeeping.

Their unemployed status is mostly due to the fact that the textile industry gave them opportunities when they had not yet finished their studies, and the need to earn extra money for their families resulted in the fact that their working lives began prematurely.

Today, having no schooling, or only basic education makes it difficult to find a job. That is why most of these women are unemployed.

The choice of photography and, within it, the choice of portraiture as a technique to make the reality of these women known has no other reason than the power of photography to make a certain social reality known.

Through photography we can get to know a reality, dive deep into it, empathize with it, personalize and understand what it is that resides in that photograph. We can here quote the words of Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography* "There is no way to suppress the intrinsic tendency of all photography to give value to its subjects."<sup>10</sup>

By choosing photography as a tool, we intend to reveal the faces of these women who worked in the sewing industry, and at the same time, through the photographs taken of the spaces in which they worked, our aim is for the viewer to visualize where and in what position they worked. Knowing this, we can better understand the reality of their work; and in the case of their portraits we can understand them more specifically as people, not only in our imagination, but we can also contemplate them and now create a face for them. Sontag also said that the camera inevitably reveals faces as social masks.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Sontag, S. & Gardini, C. (2008). *Sobre la fotografía* (p.49). Debolsillo.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p.90.

These thirty-two women are no longer simply the abstract idea of women we have in our minds, but they become flesh and blood people that we analyse in a photograph. This personalization makes the work of social awareness more effective. When we know a reality and, moreover, we can put a face to it, our feeling of understanding is emphasized. That is why Sontag writes "the photographer both plunders and preserves, denounces and consecrates at the same time".<sup>12</sup>

When we render these women immortal through photography, we are not looking for their beauty, nor a model pose, nor a perfectly studied picture. We are looking for an unemployed seamstress, a working woman, a woman who spoilt her spine sitting in front of a sewing machine. We are looking for a struggle, a recognition of her effort. We achieve this with our camera and the research we do about them. What they tell us, their experiences, what those years were like contribute to their own portrait, becoming a political tool. We quote Sontag again to back up our contribution, since with each photograph what Wittgenstein argued about words occurs : their meaning is their use.<sup>13</sup> For Berger, the meaning of a photograph is the connection between the image and the story it depicts.<sup>14</sup>

Due to the direct reference to our work the statements above contain, we proceed to tackle the work of the Farm Security Administration.

#### 4. The rural world through time and photography. References.

When talking about photography as a tool to make a certain social reality known, undoubtedly, the American photographer Lewis Hine comes to mind. Hine was one of the first (if not the first, he is at least acknowledged as such) who saw in photography the ability to bring to our eyes something more than an explanation in words about what is happening in the world. His main desire was to make his portraits true to reality in the least ambiguous way, that is to say, that what he captured with his cumbersome camera (a 5x7 inch Graflex that he learned to use through deep training and whose assembly was laborious), was as close as possible to the reality that was before his eyes and above all that through the final result we could approach and come to understand aspects of the life of the person posing that were important to him. This desire of Hine's arose in response to his personal discovery of the possibilities of photography when it comes to reflect and generate debate on social injustices. To understand this we have to place ourselves in the context that led the beginner photographer to eventually become a world-renowned one.

---

<sup>12</sup> Sontag, S. & Gardini, C. (2008). *Sobre la fotografía* (p.97). Debolsillo.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem* p.153

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem* p. 154

Hine was born in Wisconsin, his father owned a store and enjoyed a financially well-off position with his mother and sisters. However, his father was killed in a work accident and Hine had to moonlight to support her family. Fortunately, education was free in his state, so with great effort he managed to get a university education with the help of a scholarship. He studied Pedagogy and Sociology and once he finished his training he began to work as a teacher of Geography and Natural Sciences at the Ethical Culture School, whose students were mainly immigrants, including a large number of German Jews. It is there where by chance he was given the task of teaching a photography course. Although he had no knowledge of this field, he decided to agree and purchased what would be his main working tool later on, a Graflex camera. Hine decided to get down to work and delve into that technique unknown to him. He studied the manuals and gradually managed to compose photographs. Together with his students, he ventured to capture them in the streets of the city, where he unwittingly laid the foundations of what would be known in the future as social photography. The compositions he achieved were later used in his classes to generate debates and encourage his students to reflect on them. We must emphasize that the school where he taught was clearly progressive in its ideas. Through these classes and these reflections he began to realize that the photography he did, on the street, glimpsing the social reality of those who worked, served to deepen the opinions of those who saw it and generated critical thoughts as regards the reality of its protagonists, thus creating a social dispute that was very interesting for the teacher.

Little by little he began to meditate on photography and came to argue that "it is the language of all nationalities and of all ages".<sup>15</sup> Hence, he noticed its power to make negative aspects of society known, aspects that could be modified as they became known because according to him, "the greatest dangers to which a society is subjected are darkness and ignorance, light is necessary"<sup>16</sup>. His motto, which made reference to this statement and to the technique that uses light to create, was: "Let there be light". This phrase sums up very well the objective that Hine wanted to achieve with his work and that was reinforced as he took more and more photographs. So much so that he decided to quit his job as a teacher and dedicate himself professionally to photography.

Hine, who was part of the Progressive Movement, which sought to reform national education and improve the living conditions of working people and children, decided to focus his efforts on working with a team researching the living conditions of Pittsburgh workers. This team published a series of documents to raise public

---

<sup>15</sup> *Revista Mugak (2011) - nº 59 - LEWIS HINE La fotografía, una poderosa herramienta que escribe con luz - Mugak. (s. f.).*

<http://www.mugak.eu/revista-mugak/no-59/lewis-hine-la-fotografia-una-poderosa-herramienta-que-escribe-con-luz>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*

awareness of the workers' deplorable conditions and Hine decided to use his camera to add visual information to the words. This is how he began his journey through factories, cotton fields, mines and other industries, and it was here that he discovered the reality of child laborers. Thousands of children worked in the same conditions as adults. In addition, they were used for tasks that required a smaller body in 15-hour workdays, something that left Hine stunned and that he decided to capture in his photographs. In those days in the United States there was no legislation prohibiting this type of work, the children's bosses could face a fine, but the amount of money to be paid was so low that child exploitation was worth it.

Aware of this reality and the power of his photographs to change it, in 1907 he became a member of National Child Labor, where he contributed more than 5,000 photographs of the poorest crowds in the country, including thousands of children forced to work because of their social condition. To these photographs he added texts, reflections, observations, names and addresses to contextualize them and enhance their impact in order to make the viewer empathize with the people being photographed. A characteristic of these photographs is that the frontal shot predominates in them and the protagonists look at the camera, something that was frowned upon among the artistic photographic currents that had not yet been acknowledged as art and had inherited the composition techniques of painting.

Thanks to his tremendous work and the awareness it raised, in 1938 it was definitely forbidden for minors to work. This was a great achievement on the part of Hine, whose photography will forever be an example of how society can be changed by shedding light on certain aspects of it.

Hine's career continued as a member of the Red Cross, with which he travelled to Europe to photograph the hardships of World War I. This was another of his photographic achievements in terms of social modification, since thanks to his work he obtained more money for the humanitarian aid institution.

After fighting for the rights of the underprivileged, Hine decided to pursue new horizons, publishing his only book, in which he depicts the construction of the Empire State Building in 1930, called "Men At Work". Although it is the work that brought him the most fame in his career, his desire for social change is not present in it, as he chooses to reflect on the relationship between men and machines, so it is not so interesting for our work.

Although his photography was priceless, in the last years of his life Hine did not get work. His work was not in demand, since in those early days of photography there was little work. In addition, in the 1930s and after understanding that he had managed to establish in society that photography had many possibilities when it comes to reformulating the written word, the U.S. government formed the Farm

Security Administration, which followed his path. Even so, they decided not to count on him because they considered him an obsolete photographer, and chose to ignore his insistence on belonging to the corporation, where he thought he could fit in and whose economic retribution was an urgent need for him. The answer was negative and in 1940 he died, financially ruined.

Although without a doubt the decision made by the Farm Security Administration was reprehensible, the work it carried out must be mentioned since, like Hine's, it achieved great social changes. Of course, the foundations had been laid years before by the Wisconsin photographer who they did not want to admit, like someone who does not recognize his father.

The Farm Security Administration was created in the United States after the Great Depression of 1929 to remodel the rural sector, which was very impoverished and hard-hit as a result of the dust bowl. It was Franklin Roosevelt, during his presidency, who sponsored a photographic campaign to take pictures of the consequences of the Great Depression. The idea was to use the photographs to appeal for official aid to farmers and ranchers.<sup>17</sup>

On March 4, 1933, Roosevelt took office as president of the United States, taking on responsibility for fighting the Great Depression his country faced. Poverty and famine were spreading throughout the USA, especially in the most rural areas.<sup>18</sup> That same day, he admitted in front of the Capitol the need to confront the problem. He suggested that the issue of unemployment could be solved "if we face it wisely and with courage." In his speech, the future president's visual language "echoed a major cultural shift in Depression-era modes of knowledge and representation"<sup>19</sup>. Roosevelt not only asks Americans to confront the problems of the Depression, but to face them, which implies a visual engagement, both literally and metaphorically.

Curiously, that is exactly what the photographers of the FSA (initially known as the Resettlement Administration, RA) did between 1935 and 1943 with the subjects they photographed, facing them, confronting them or statically facing the camera lens, showing naked poverty and human dignity, without cover or adornment, with no apparent expression on the faces of the photographed individuals who stoically posed in front of the lens. Funded by the American government, as part of the president's New Deal policy, the project was intended to reshape the rural sector

---

<sup>17</sup> *Revista Mugak (2011) - nº 59 - LEWIS HINE La fotografía, una poderosa herramienta que escribe con luz - Mugak. (s. f.).*

<sup>18</sup> *Revista Mugak - no 59 - LEWIS HINE La fotografía, una poderosa herramienta que escribe con luz - Mugak. (s. f.-b).*

<http://www.mugak.eu/revista-mugak/no-59/lewis-hine-la-fotografia-una-poderosa-herramienta-que-escribe-con-luz>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*

and, to that end, the photographers hired - among them Arthur Rothstein, Carl Mydans, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, and Dorothea Lange, and later Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, Jack Delano, John Vachon, and John Collier, John Vachon, and John Collier- under the direction of sociologist Roy Stryker, were to record the miserable existence which the peasants had no choice but to live, documenting the life of a particular family over a period of time, in order to see the effects of the economic recovery programme promoted by Roosevelt: "the realism was deliberate, calculated and highly stylized. [...] Stryker and his team created a powerful portrait that communicated rural suffering in terms that a middle-class urban citizen could understand" (CURTIS, 1989:6).



Dorothea Lange. Greek migratory woman living in a cotton camp near Exeter, California, c.1935



Dorothea Lange. Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936



Dorothea Lange. Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936

In the same vein, another work that inspired not so much the composition of the photos as the harmony which was sought in *As Mulleres da Cooperativa* was the work *Gente del siglo XX* (*People of the 20th century*) by the German August Sander. August Sander was born in 1876 in Siegerland, the son of a mine carpenter who also had a small farm. He began working as a miner, where he is supposed to have first seen a camera during a technical survey conducted by an engineer from the company that owned the mine. In 1900, Sander moved to the Austrian city of Linz to work in a photography studio, where he produced his first works, which can be fully framed within pictorialism. However, something must have changed in his way of conceiving art, because without having gone through a known transition phase, nothing of that aesthetic remained when he settled professionally in Cologne in mid-1910. From the first day of opening, his studio stood out in the defense, at that time a minority, of what he called "exact photography": that which denounced any kind of manipulation, retouching or added chromatic nuance.<sup>20</sup>

Sander gradually built up a collection of portraits of the different social groups in German society at the time, and thus *Men of the 20th Century*, which would later become known as his most successful work, was born.

'I want to convey frankly the truth of our time and its people,' he wrote in 1927, in a presentation of his project.

Despite its publication date, most of the photographs in this small partial compendium were taken between 1910 and 1914, that is, during the height of the German Empire and just before the outbreak of the First World War. The country in

---

<sup>20</sup> L' ATALANTE JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2011 (reedición de 2013)

which they became known a few years later had absolutely nothing to do with the country in which they were taken, but out of the ashes of one of the most powerful powers in history, the weak and humiliated Weimar Republic had emerged. The situation of deep and prolonged economic, political and social crisis ended up taking its toll on the population, which opted to throw itself into the arms of all kinds of anti-democratic populist movements in search of an uncertain change. As we all know, it was National Socialism that finally prevailed in 1933.<sup>21</sup>

This would not have been possible if German people had not lived through a previous stage of confusion and demoralization that made them forget their true identity and their most recent history. Sander seemed to be one of the few who remembered it and with the release of *Faces of Our Time* he intended to refresh the memory of his fellow countrymen<sup>22</sup>. Sander considered more than five hundred photographs for that first and only installation, from which in the end he selected only seventy. The artist chose various genre types, and included among them the individuals who could most irritate the Nazi doctrine of racial purity.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, although it was not the primary purpose of his work, through it the social prototype that the Nazis had promoted was dismissed and, for this reason, his work was hidden.



August Sander  
The Mother in Joy and Grief  
1911

---

<sup>21</sup> L' ATALANTE JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2011 (reedición de 2013)  
Migraciones: Las uvas de La ira y los objetivos de la Farm security adMinistration  
Rebeca Romero Escrivá

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*



August Sander  
The Fighter or Revolutionary  
1912



August Sander  
The Woman of the Soil, 1912

## 5. Sisterhood in photography

The Farm Security Administration and August Sander have helped us to find the guidelines for our work, to understand and give shape to what we wanted to express through it. They have provided our project with a theoretical framework, that is to say, we understood through these projects what the philosophy of ours was. We mean that although our objective was defined from the beginning, through Sander and the photographers of the Farm Security Administration we were able to better understand how photography can be a political weapon, and how the simple act of photographing can contribute to changing society.

Beyond these objectives, we became aware of the importance of talking about the female face, given that our project features only women.

The reason for this goes beyond the answer that first comes to mind, namely, "because sewing is women's work". The truth is that the choice to portray these women is not only related to their work but also to influential people that we admire and have become an inspiration for us.

When we began the research study that could give shape to our final project, a thesis of this same Master's Degree that we are studying fell into our hands. Its title is *EFEITOS SIMULTÂNEOS: O Olhar da Mulher e a Empatia Através da Objetiva* and its author is Martina Gelpi Alves.

Martina reflects on how we, women photographers, look through our lens differently than a male photographer might.

"If today I am a woman who uses photography to create and explore, it is because in truth there was a construction and a whole narrative before me. And that's why, as I delved deeper into a particular image, I realized that I needed references that I could approach and identify with more strongly, especially when it came to finding a project that was mine and with which I felt close to creating."<sup>24</sup>

Little by little we immersed ourselves in the reading of the thesis, which allowed us to put into words the reasons why *As Mulleres da Cooperativa* was the project that we had chosen to carry out. It had to do with our way of looking, our personal interests, in sum, with looking for ourselves in our photographs of other women, photographing on the basis of understanding and empathy.

"Such a construction inverted the possibility of a new imaginative of women in the visual arts, because it allowed a record coming from the optics of the woman

---

<sup>24</sup> Gelpi Alves M (2019). *EFEITOS SIMULTÂNEOS: O Olhar da Mulher e a Empatia Através da Objetiva* (Tesis de master). Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto.

herself, revealing a look for herself and an impulse as a way of channeling and pulsating emotions and desires that were restless. Touching the lens initiated a path of emancipation that culminated in sorority and resignification of ways of seeing. Demonstrating, finally, that looking at women results in looking for oneself from the self-portrait or the portrait of others (...) The meanings are multiple, because there is not only one way of seeing - however, there is something in common and that has always been a guideline in the imagery of women: recognition".<sup>25</sup>

Soon we began to analyze our personal work and in general, our daily sources of inspiration. It is true that in all our projects we intend for women to be acknowledged, and we feel more empathy and appreciation for the female sex. In recent years, with the rise of feminism, this has gained prominence.

In this way, we perceive that in our personal projects, which cover both the audiovisual and the photographic fields, female faces are most sought after. Not because of fashion or to respond to an established social model, but by choice. This has to do directly with the empathy we feel towards women who were not recognized as they should be, and above all with the fact that there are already too many men sitting in the front rows. Maybe we have had enough of this male central role, though we believe it has more to do with wanting to open a space for so many women who prevail under the "mountain" of macho men.

To explain our interest in women in more detail, we have to think first of our family. In our family in particular, our main references are our grandmother and great-grandmother. We have grown up with them and with them we have lived the most important moments in our childhood. From them we have gained wisdom, advice, ways of speaking and thinking, and everything that comes with spending time with those closest to you in the early years of your life. Moreover, when love and admiration go hand in hand, the former becomes stronger and leaves a deeper mark.

Besides them, our mother. All of them are fundamental pillars and also models in terms of ways of thinking and acting. Hard-working, strong, intelligent. Three adjectives that undoubtedly describe the personalities of the women who have been an example to us. Traits that we would like to be perpetuated in us.

Male relatives are left behind, not because they deserve less appreciation, but because the work developed by women has always been greater and more delicate, more careful, closer. In short, it made a greater mark on us.

---

<sup>25</sup> Gelpi Alves M (2019). *EFEITOS SIMULTÂNEOS: O Olhar da Mulher e a Empatia Através da Objetiva* (Tesis de master). Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto.

Furthermore, if we go outside our home, we are surrounded by courageous, hardworking, understanding female neighbours. Also, we can't forget the female teachers in the different stages of our lives. And we repeat, it has nothing to do with the appreciation that each one deserves, but with the degree of understanding that we show to those who are equal to us. In the end, being a woman, you suffer certain social realities that make you empathize more with those who are more likely to suffer them.

Nowadays, as photographers and videographers, this admiration for the female world becomes more specific. We seek in our work to give voice to those who impact us the most, who amaze us the most and make our hearts shrink the most, and we always find women. After being engrossed in the reading of *EFEITOS SIMULTANEOS: O Olhar da Mulher e a Empatia Através da Objetiva* we had to run to find female models for our work, already focused on women. It opened our eyes even more to what we wanted to achieve with this project.

This is how we started to explore the works of Susan Meiselas and Cláudia Varejao. In these three works we found similarities. We related to them and new ideas about our work emerged, as well as becoming aware of shared theoretical approaches.

In short, Martina's thesis nourished us not only in terms of our work, but also made us better understand our role as photographers. The identification with what Gelpi wrote made us mature. Somehow, she helped us discover the underlying reasons why our projects were chosen, and gave us the answers that we did not know we needed but that now conform us and help us understand in a more precise way the reason for our work.

## 5.1 Susan Meiselas

Susan Meiselas is a documentary photographer based in New York. She is the author of *Carnival Strippers* (1976), *Nicaragua* (1981), *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* (1997), *Pandora's Box* (2001), *Encounters with the Dani* (2003) *Prince Street Girls* (2016), *A Room Of Their Own* (2017) and *Tar Beach* (2020).

Meiselas is well known for recording human rights issues in Latin America. Her photographs are featured in North American and international collections.<sup>26</sup>

In one of her latest works, *A Room Of Their Own* (2017), Meiselas photographed refugee women residing in a facility in the Black Country region of New England.

---

<sup>26</sup> ABOUT - Susan Meiselas. (s. f.). Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos. <https://www.susanmeiselas.com/biography>

The main motivation for taking the photographs was how fond of them the photographer had felt upon meeting them (Meiselas, 2019).

This project gradually became a collaborative action in which the women who lived in that centre allowed Meiselas to photograph them, thus attaching images to extensive dialogues in which they got to know each other. Their stories “ opened the shutter” and became portraits on paper.

In addition to sharing private talks in the intimacy of their rooms, Meiselas shared time with them in other activities carried out at the centre in which the protagonists met with professionals in the areas of health, psychology, coaching and the arts to alleviate the consequences of the abuse they had suffered at the hands of their peers or their families.

These activities were intended to help them face their fears so that in the future they could live happily or at least be able to try to do so beyond those walls. They also fostered the feeling of belonging to a group, the feeling of being supported and, above all, sisterhood.

Somehow, thanks to these activities, Meiselas had the opportunity to better gain entrance to the intimacy of these women, who were able to open up and face a camera, an action that may not seem much but in fact shows a lot of courage. After these activities, Meiselas returned to their rooms, hence, her project was renamed *A Room Of Their Own* (2017).

When you are in this kind of centre, your room is your home, it is the only space that somehow belongs to you and where you keep your intimacy and your true self.

The complicity that Meiselas had created with them allowed her to access this highly personal space and create photographs that could only have been born from a relationship of trust.

While most rooms were empty, others were cluttered with temporary belongings. Let us remember that the women to whom these spaces belonged are considered refugees, that is, they fled from situations in which they could not carry everything they wanted, sometimes not even what they most needed.

The most common objects, showing the choices made by people forced to run away, were picture frames, shoe collections and religious prints. Others brought life, as they got pregnant in the middle of the catastrophe and sometimes that's precisely why they had to flee.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Gelpi Alves M (2019). *EFEITOS SIMULTÂNEOS: O Olhar da Mulher e a Empatia Através da Objetiva* (Tesis de master). Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto.

The project "A Room Of Their Own" collects the stories of women refugees from wars that also took place inside them. Meiselas' photographs reflect their inner search, the forced estrangement from the person they were and the process of learning to become the one they want to be from now on. Often, the faces do not appear for their own safety, to be protected not only from others but also from themselves.

These photographs, together with the documents that resulted from the activities they carried out and some letters and messages made up the book *A Room Of Their Own*. In it, Susan Meiselas intends to reflect the idea that an empty room is an opportunity to create a new life, while trying to represent "the idea of settling down and talking about the desire to move on." (Meiselas, 2019).

Empathy and trust are the leitmotif of this project. The spaces I photograph were previously constructed in some way by Meiselas. These rooms now speak volumes about the people who inhabit them, since their owners had the courage to open them and show them, an exercise that denotes a further step forward by the protagonists and puts the photographer at the centre.

The relationship that Meiselas had established with the protagonists, which had allowed her to interfere in their privacy through understanding and respect, fills the photographs of this project and elevates them far beyond a mere documentary work.

As for how she was able to approach them, as we have already said, Meiselas participated with them in activities in which it was important to let out what was inside them, in addition to tucking them in and accompanying them in the centre. Had a female photographer (staring in admiration and empathy) not been the author of the project, the final work would not have been fully satisfactory. That is, the fact that we are women brings us closer to those of our own condition. Even if we are in different stages, moments in life, even if our situation is not the same, we will trust a woman more than a man, because we feel more identified, we understand each other better, we know what we are talking about. This is something common, it is easier for two women who interact to understand each other.

In the case of photography we experience photographic sorority, and as we have been developing throughout this work, focusing on *The Women of the Cooperative*, as photographers we feel identified with female experiences, which are often where our inspiration comes from.

Therefore, in Meiselas' work we identify two very important premises when it comes to including it as a reference for our own. Meiselas is a woman who managed (through respect and dialogue) to establish a deep connection with someone that

she could have been in another moment in her life, in another time, in a parallel universe. The mere possibility of being equal produces a communion and makes it easier to understand the context and the feelings of the subject who speaks (the woman who gives her testimony). This sorority, at the same time, elevates the inspiration of those who take the photographs because, just as the one who is photographed feels understood, the one who remains behind the camera does so with the desire to heal what she hears and sees.

The other premise is our desire for the stories we photograph to make an impact. We want others to listen to them, understand them and above all, understand that these realities exist and that those who live them are in the same world we inhabit. May they be recognized. We share with Meiselas the desire to show a story that at some point came to us, left a mark, and we believe it is necessary that it is known because we are not alone, we are part of a society that, to our mind, needs to change in many ways. We only look for those that inspire us and then we release our projects to reach others and “disturb” them, and thus, we are already changing the world, even if it is on a small scale.



Susan Meiselas Rose, Room 9. A refuge in the Black Country. UK. 2016. ©



Susan Meiselas Eva and her daughter in their new home. Black Country. 2016. UK.



Susan Meiselas Angel (Dawn's daughter), Suite 7. A refuge in the Black Country. UK. 2016.

## 5.2 Cláudia Varejão

Cláudia Varejão was born and spent her early years in Porto. She is currently known for her work as a filmmaker. Her films have been recognized at major film festivals such as Locarno and Rotterdam.

Among them there is one, entitled *Ama-San*, starring Japanese women whose job is to dive and fish with their own hands and without oxygen cylinders or any breathing method other than the natural one, that is, their practice is carried out by taking advantage of their ability to free dive.<sup>28</sup>

This practice, which is carried out in the open sea, is millenary. It caught the attention of the director, who defined it as poetry created by these women and by their feminine presence in the sea. Their physical effort, their female body and the sea are captured by Varejao's delighted gaze, as she contemplates them with curiosity and enthusiasm.

It is also striking because it is an exclusively feminine job (body fat hinders how long a person can spend underwater) in Japan, a not very progressive country in terms of feminism.

These women find that their job allows them to outperform men, something unthinkable in other contexts due to the customs in their culture. That is why they feel self-confident and admired, because every day they show what they are capable of. And their strength does not end there. After work, they go home and take care of their families, they do the household chores that women are supposed to do because they are fragile. In fact, their hard work shows us how upstanding and magnificent they are.<sup>29</sup>

The group portrayed by Varejao takes delight in the work they do, as they are aware that no man can ever hope to match them and enjoy boasting that this work "is ours".

Although they are highly regarded in today's Japanese society, their work was even much more highly valued in the last century, as many men at that time did not work and it was these women who were the breadwinners.

Varejao's work comes to celebrate the daily life of these women.

---

<sup>28</sup> *ama-san* — *claudiavarejao*. (s. f.). <https://claudiavarejao.com/ama-san>

<sup>29</sup> Gelpi Alves M (2019). *EFEITOS SIMULTÂNEOS: O Olhar da Mulher e a Empatia Através da Objetiva* (Tesis de master). Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto.

She also took advantage of some moments during the filming to take photographs. These, together with the shots, reflect on the power of women and their strength while building a dialogue with the female universe in general through the relationships and behaviours developed by the protagonists.<sup>30</sup>

After analysing the work carried out by Claudia Varejao and reading articles about *Ama-San*, we come to the same conclusion as in the case of Meiselas. Being a woman is what most helped her to achieve the final result.

Claudia Varejao not only portrays the "Ama" at work, but also enters their homes and lives to capture the images that make up her documentary. She slips into the most personal moments of their daily life. We have to emphasize that the Ama San are part of the Japanese culture, very different from the western one. It is more reserved, more "kept indoors", more hidden and shy. Let us imagine a feminine character in this context, which is by no means more open than the western world, the western world, where the traditional patriarchal system is still preponderant. If the Japanese are much less extroverted than us, Japanese women go one step further. Quietness, silence, fragility... are identified with the female figure.

In addition, in the case of the "Ama" we have to add the concept of sexuality and eroticism, since historically, those who were dedicated to abalone fishing (a highly prized seafood in Japan, China and Korea which has become fashionable in the U.S. and Europe in recent years) plunged into the depths of the sea, 20 or 30 metres under the water, almost completely naked. From the predominant male viewpoint, this characteristic of their work implied that their sensuality was more appealing to them than the effort involved in descending to such depths without protection and without a system that allowed breathing. In other words, the task that these women are capable of completing with absolute rigor and dedication is overshadowed by their nudity, which makes them worthy of admiration only as visually beautiful, feminine, unclothed bodies.

It is here where Varejao's work makes the difference and, of course, the reason is that it is a female gaze that once again makes women the protagonists. Let's have some more context.

In the 50's, the photographer and videographer (among many other facets) Fosco Maraini travelled around Japan to learn about its culture. His curiosity led him to become interested in the oriental world and on one of his trips from Italy to the Asian continent he met the Ama. It should be noted that this photographer was also an ethnologist who wrote extensive guides about the country, so his interest in these fisherwomen was academic. Before visiting the Wagu fishing community,

---

<sup>30</sup> Gelpi Alves M (2019). *EFEITOS SIMULTÂNEOS: O Olhar da Mulher e a Empatia Através da Objetiva* (Tesis de master). Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto.

where these workers that had captivated his attention lived, Maraini decided to first read all the available information about them. This is how he got to know the Japanese prints, where buildings, people, typical images of the Japanese culture are represented and which serve to preserve it and create a sense of community among its inhabitants and beyond its borders. In these prints, the representation of the Ama had many sexual overtones, which had a strong influence on the way the photographer captured the women's nudity. We must also explain in this regard that nudity is not perceived in Eastern culture in the same way as in the West. The sexual component that being naked has for us (as a whole society, it is clear that there are exceptions) does not exist in the Eastern world, although in our (and Maraini's) eyes, it may be interpreted in this way due to our social construction.

The influence of the images he used as a reference, those prints of the Ama, makes him visualize nothing but naked female bodies descending into the depths of the sea when he gets close to them and immerses himself in his work. The images are sensual, erotic, full of mischief. In short, it is a sexual representation of a job whose sacrifice and preparation loses importance in the photographs.



“Mujeres Ama”. Fosco Marainini



"Mujeres Ama". Fosco Marainini



"Mujeres Ama". Fosco Marainini

In the case of Claudia Varejao, the perspective is completely different in terms of sexuality and this is what we want to emphasize. In fact, at the beginning of the Portuguese director's film, we hear a woman's voice- over who says the following:

"Down there silence prevails. However, there is much to see. There is a whole wonderful world between the rocks. But it takes courage to know it."(Varejão, 2016).

In these sentences Varejao intends to highlight the courage that these women need to descend, she praises these women's bravery (and does not only look at their bodies and how sensual it is to dive into the depths naked, quite the contrary). Moreover, these statements help us to see through their eyes and that makes them somehow powerful, something which Varejao highlights.

Another important detail when looking at these women from Varejao's standpoint is that she decides to call her film *Ama-San*. Ama is Japanese for mistress, while San is sea. In other words, the filmmaker presents these women as the ladies of the sea, highlighting the power of their trade, giving them a fair role in society and honoring, above all, their fishing activity.

We must specify that the Ama of contemporary Japan are not the same as those photographed by Maraini in 1954, and Varejao also stresses this when it comes to paying tribute to them. In the documentary we see how these women are economically independent, their role as working women who are a reference in their families is emphasized and in addition to their work at sea, they also carry out their own household chores.



Cláudia Varejão. Frame de la película Ama-San, Japón, 2016.



Cláudia Varejão. Frame de la película *Ama-San*, Japón, 2016.

In the case of Claudia Varejao, her perspective as a woman allows her to have access to the homes of these women, to their most intimate lives and also to their working hours. It is necessary to highlight in this respect that Claudia Varejao does not speak Japanese and that she only visited this community on two occasions, in 2013 and 2014. In Maraini's case, he first had to earn the trust of the community since, as he himself said, the first time he stepped on their territory with a camera, people ran away. It is true that nowadays people are more tolerant of the use of cameras simply because they have become accustomed to them, but an important role is also played by the admiration, empathy and sorority with which only a woman can cross intimate lines in less time when it comes to talking to peers.

Secondly, it is this admiration, empathy and sisterhood, together with the fact that she is a woman and suffers constant sexualization that makes her not even consider looking at those women in a sexual light. *Ama-San* flees from sexuality and settles on what the director finds interesting and wants to preserve, while at the same time her admiration turns her documentary into an exaltation of hard, feminine work, in which deep preparation, strength and concentration are needed. In short, Varejao wants these women to occupy the place that belongs to them and that starts from her own stupefaction turned into a documentary.

## 6. Practical Work

### 6.1 Photographic series



Nombre: Lucía

Localidad: Nocado do Val



Nombre: Paquita  
Localidad: Mixós



Nombre: Carmen  
Localidad: Verín



Nombre: Mari Carmen  
Localidad: Mixós



Nombre: Julia  
Localidad: Verín



Nombre: Modesta

Localidad: Verín



Nombre: María José  
Localidad: A Pousa



Nombre: Dolores  
Localidad: A Pousa



Nombre: Concha  
Localidad: A Pousa



Nombre: Corona  
Localidad: Tintores



Nombre: Clarita  
Localidad: Pazos



Nombre: Pili  
Localidad: Verín



Nombre: Ana  
Localidad: Verín



Nombre: Tere  
Localidad: Retorta



Nombre: Preciosa  
Localidad: Retorta



Nombre: Margarita  
Localidad: Vilela



Nombre: Mercedes  
Localidad: Vilela



Nombre: Estrella  
Localidad: Vilela



Nombre: Viruca  
Localidad: Vilela



Nombre: Conchita  
Localidad: Mixós



Nombre: Calina  
Localidad: Verín



Nombre: María  
Localidad: A Pousa



Nombre: Estrella  
Localidad: Estevesiños



Nombre: Marisa  
Localidad: Vences



Nombre: Sira y Manola  
Localidad: Mixós



Nombre: Tinucha  
Localidad: Vences



Nombre: Pepita  
Localidad: Vences



Nombre: Chelo  
Localidad: Vences



Nombre: Ramona  
Localidad: Verín



Nombre: Che  
Localidad: A Pousa

## 7. Conclusion

*The Women of the Cooperative* is a project out of admiration whose objective is to publicise the history of the women who dedicated part of their lives to an industry that ended up being one of the most prestigious and important in the region of Verín.

The work process (word about the project was spread by word of mouth) strengthened the relationships of trust that somehow are created in a small town in which, even unintentionally, we get to know about our neighbours' lives.

Knocking on their doors and being let into their homes and ultimately into their lives lead to the building of a relationship through which they ended up becoming more empowered. In addition, our relationship was transformed after a dialogue about their past which took place in the present with the photographer they allowed to portray and interview them.

It was out of admiration that this project started. After that, the bonds created during the process grew stronger. We built rapport and got to trust each other. They got to know me better through my work and my questions. As for me, I was welcomed into their homes and entrusted with their personal stories.

The aim of this work is to capture the present of these women and demonstrate that they are more than numbers. It also serves as a reflection for the thousands of others who found themselves in the same situation and whose daily lives are now similar to the lives of those depicted in the portraits. Treated as if they were numbers, they were the seamstresses who at some point made Inditex's clothes. Through their portraits they become something more than that, we can distinguish them and feel identified in some way with them, either because we know them or because when someone tells us the history of the textile industry in Verín we can identify those faces with those words.

Thanks to the project, we paid attention to the current situation of these women, who opened up either in their homes or, in fewer cases, in their businesses, since they were forced into unemployment as a result of the outsourcing of the chains they were working for by those who only think about getting richer.

Beyond these objectives, we have to emphasize that both meeting up with these women and analysing the theoretical framework on which this project is grounded stimulated reflection about myself as a photographer. As a woman, I can relate to others like me more easily and establish relationships of trust in a simpler way (not in terms of process, but in terms of know-how and sisterhood). The admiration I feel

for them has to do with my own background. In my family, female support is the most important thing, since my grandmother, my mother and my great-grand aunts were role models. But so are those friends who surround me and who are my "army" and my support. This admiration is born not only out of love, but also out of something that is beyond our friendship: respect and understanding. This also makes them a source of inspiration for my relationships with other women, for example, in the artistic field. This admiration becomes the main reference when it comes to observing a female reality.

*The Women of the Cooperative* is the result of my fascination for feminine strength. This is not something I knew at the beginning of the project, at least it was not something I could verbalize as I can now. In short, it started from that fascination and was reinforced by my reflections throughout both field work and writing process. Theoretical support and reading made the project mature until it was consolidated and allowed me to discover myself as a photographer. Now I know more about what I am like and what I want with my projects.

Finally, this project's objectives will be fulfilled when the photographs and stories are made public. It is also our aim that all those who participated can recognize and admire themselves for who they are. In addition, regarding the general public, they are expected to learn about these stories and their protagonists and, consequently, admire them both locally and far afield.

This project will become a book in which the portraits and stories of all the protagonists will be compiled to weave a fabric that will unite all of us. A fabric that can be touched, read and known. A canvas that will spread the word on these women who were the breadwinners for a large part of their lives, and who also created a space in which they were completely independent, self-confident and strong.

## 8. Bibliography

BENJAMIN, Walter. (2017) *Magia e técnica, arte e política*. Brasiliense, Dec 14

BARTHES, R., & Sanahuja, J. S. (2020). *La cámara lúcida: nota sobre la fotografía*. Paidós.

CASTILLO RAMÍREZ, G. (2015). La fotografía como registro atropológico. Aproximaciones, alcances y limitaciones de la imagen fotográfica como fuente de representación de la otredad. Margen.

ENGELI, G., CRUZ M. Á. C., & CÁMBARA, A. E. L. (2011). *Arte, intervención y acción social: la creatividad transformadora*. Grupo Editorial Patria.

FONTCUBERTA, J. (2012) *La cámara de pandora: La fotografía después de la fotografía*.

FONTCUBERTA, J. *El beso de Judas. Fotografía y verdad*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1997

FONTCUBERTA, J. (2013) *Postfotografía según Joan Fontcuberta*.

FREUND, G. (2017). *La fotografía como documento social (1.)*. Editorial Gustavo Gili.

GODINHO, P. C. A. (2017). Presas por um fio: costureiras de Verín, modalidades da produção têxtil local e trânsitos mundiais. In P. Tomé Martín (Ed.), *Reflexiones Rayanas* (Vol. 1º, pp. 103-126). Asociación de Antropología de Castilla y León "Michael Kenny".

LEDO, M. (1998). *Documentalismo fotográfico: éxodos e identidad*. Madrid: Cátedra.

MEISELAS, S. Community Projects: "A room of their own". Disponible a partir de <http://www.susanmeiselas.com/community-projects-1975-2015/a-room-of-their-own/> Acceso em 27 maio 2019.

MEISELAS, S. Photographer Bio. Disponible a partir de <http://www.susanmeiselas.com/info/#id=intro>

MORENO GONZÁLEZ, A. (2013): La Cultura como Agente de Cambio Social en el Desarrollo Comunitario. *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad* , 25(1) 95-110

PÉREZ RODRÍGUEZ, M.L. *El autorretrato o identidad ante la cámara fotográfica*. Valencia: S.I.: El autor, 2008

PÉREZ GALLARDO, H. (2007). El reportaje gráfico. En Sougez, M.L (coord.); García Felguera, M; Pérez Gallardo, H. y Vega, C. Historia general de la fotografía (pp.367-491). Madrid: Cátedra.

SANTOS, André Almeida (2017) "«Ama-san». O mergulho de Cláudia Varejão com as japonesas encantadas", Observador, 26 de Janeiro de 2017, <https://observador.pt/especiais/amasan-o-mergulho-de-claudia-varejao-com-as-japonesas-encantadas/>. Acedido a 6 de Setembro de 2021.

SONTAG, S., & Gardini, C. (2008b). *Sobre la fotografía*. Debolsillo.

TAGG, J. (2005) El peso de la representación. Editorial Gustavo Gili, SA. Barcelona

VAREJÃO, Cláudia (2016) Ama-San, DVD, Lisboa, Midas Filmes. ——— (s. a) "Ama-san" Texto de apresentação do serviço fotográfico sobre as Ama. <https://claudiavarejao.com/ama-san-o-texto>. Acedido a 3 de Setembro de 2021