

**Metaculture I**

Prof. Luísa Leal de Faria

**Final Exam**

**The Face of Others:  
Alterity and Realism in a project crossing photography and painting**

**Introduction**

Historically, images are a form of knowledge having a significant participation in the visual construction of culture. From ancient religion icons representation to current digital imagery, images have been consolidating the way we perceive our visual world, always carrying several layers of meanings. They exist in different forms and in different social spaces: from technical images to art history, from mental representations to mixed medias. This is especially true for photography imagery. Digital image production and the circulation of photographs have completely changed the way we relate with the representation of our culture and the other's culture.

The current *pictorial turn*<sup>1</sup> raises the question of how we are absorbing the stormy flow of visual information. Thus, the importance of a field of visual studies encompassing the multiformity and ubiquity of images should be underlined in the realm of Culture Studies. The discipline of Visual Literacy provides certain tools to grasp on the diversity of visual representations in a socio-historical scope, considering the specificities of each media. To present the possibilities of Visual Literacy under the lights of Cultural Studies, I will investigate the artistic project *The Others*, directed by the photographer and visual artist Olivier Culmann. The project deals with questions such as cultural boundaries, vernacular culture, participatory project and self-representation. I will analyse how these concepts collaborate to the field of Visual Literacy, and how the referred project can be seen at same time as an object of conceptual analysis and as source of knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell is suspicious about the term "pictorial turn". According to him, this is a figure of thought which reappears in history each time a new technology of reproduction is invented, and it is not unique of our time. The term has become today a commonplace. What may be specific of our days is that images production, circulation and consumption have increased exponentially, and have become an urging topic not only in politics and mass culture, but also in fields such as psychology, social behavior and the subjective notion of the self.

## **Produce-Circulate-Perceive**

As a field of analysis, Visual Literacy can permeate different practices beyond the artistic field – such as pedagogy of images, image production, communication through images, and even the very individual relations we have with images in our private lives. I chose the project *The Others* (Olivier Culmann, 2014) as a study case because it underlines how photography is used in its ordinary practices. Photography can be a tool to promote knowledge about culture specially because it is a visual practice present in almost all domains of society. This study strengthens the idea that photography must be seen as a cultural practice.

From the production of new images, to their circulation, and to their perception, Visual Literacy means everyone's ability to read images. Thereby, in the actual context of current technologies these three axes seem to be more than ever connected, and it is essential to analyze their interrelation in the visual practices. For the production, we should consider the access provided by the digital technologies, where almost everyone is able to produce images. This so-called democratization of means of production should be carefully analyzed, as it can be used for non-democratic purposes as well. The same is valid for the circulation, where the constant flow of images can lead to a superficial analysis of the object. Consequently, the third aspect, related to the perception and the interpretation of images, begs our attention.

The present article will focus on the third aspect: the perception of images taking as study case an artistic photographic project. However, as it was stated above, images perception can be approached through an array of photographic practices. Here, the general area of interest is the documentary photographic practices inserted in the cultural field. Their common features are: dealing with protocols such as active participation or interactivity with the project object, collective authorship, shift from conventional artistic space and project autonomy. The cultural knowledge afforded by images is the common ground with the other photographic practices. It is in this sense, that the project analysed approach the concept of visual literacy.

### **Cultural Studies: documentary perspectives**

In the field of Cultural Studies, images appear as symbolic systems for ordinary practices. As Raymond Williams states, the real turning point for Cultural Studies is when it embraces culture in its everyday life practices, underling the importance of collective events, such as rituals and celebrations. By studying images as material and symbolic production, one can define culture in a Documentary Perspective.

And what would be this Documentary Perspective? For Raymond Williams, it would be the communication of certain values through cultural production (Williams 1998). It lies in the idea of how human thoughts and experiences are recorded in documents, and how they are described and valued. We will see further how this important idea underlies the project “The Others”. The following quotation highlights the relevance of the documentary approach:

“The significance of documentary culture is that, more clearly than anything else, it expresses that life to us in direct terms, when the living witnesses are silent. At the same time, if we reflect on the nature of a structure of feeling, and see how it can fail to be fully understood even by living people in close contact with it (...) we shall not suppose that we ever do more than make an approach, an approximation...” (Williams 1998, 53).

From a different perspective, the idea of document has been explored by Michel Foucault in his famous formulation that History in what transforms documents into monuments. He puts forward the idea that History has changed its position regarding the document. Instead of restoring the past into the present – in other words, transforming monuments into documents - History mainly organizes, classifies, constitutes series and describes relationships along with documents (Foucault 2002, 6). The notion of “discontinuity” is what legitimate new forms of knowledge within these heterogeneous – and sometimes conflicting – series. In this sense, it is vital to read the cultural knowledge embedded in the documents, allowing history to move toward archeology, and aiming at the description of objects as documents.

In the historical perspective of photography, the term “document” was used until the end of the 1920’s as a noun. Originally, the term had to do with impersonality, lack of narrative qualities of an image. The first photograph documents were identity photos, images of ordinary objects and sales catalogs. They shared common features such as extreme clarity, simplified frames - usually frontal views of the subject - neutrality, and absence of any expressive mark. It is only towards the end of the 1930’s that the noun “document” make place to the adjective “documentary”, enabling a more humanist dimension of the issue (Lugon 2001, 12).

The documentary perspective in both photography and in Cultural Studies share the same interest for human culture and its representations. Both are concerned about writing a new history which avoids totalities and definitive concepts. Putting together different series and approaches, they are able to foster a knowledge which is independent of traditional established models. One can attest the cultural approach of documentary photography, through the works of some pioneers such as Walker Evans and August Sanders. These photographers have grasped the intrinsic qualities of documents, and used them within well-established pictorial art genres

such as portrait, landscape and architecture depiction. Together these unlikely documents operate as a series of disruptions, fostering a knowledge arisen from discontinuity.

Analogous to Raymond Williams *Structure of Feeling*, photography documentary practices have the power to express a given cultural reality to us in direct terms. Along with Foucault's conception of documents as monuments, they compose series and create complex relationships with different elements. Culture in a documentary perspective is thus a valuable source of information which is accessible not only through artistic practices, but also in ordinary actions and social rituals.

Following, we would like to draw some lines about the recent field of Visual Literacy which will support the analysis of our study object. By delimitating Visual Literacy possibilities and potentials, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of documentary practices in contemporary photography and, on a larger scale, in culture.

## Visual Literacy

The term was first used by Art Historian James Elkins meaning the capacity of any scholar to read images (Elkins 2003). In the common sense, the word "literacy" comes from the text (and not from images), standing for the capacity to read and write. However, as an adjective, "literate" can refer to someone who is intelligent, who has a good knowledge or understanding about a subject (especially about literature and arts), bringing the definition to other domains. For instance, one can talk about "digital literacy" or "financial literacy".

It seems however that the original definition is founded on the idea of acquiring knowledge through a technological transposition (Gil 2011). This implies that the literary text is learned when it becomes a mental image. So, in its origins literacy is already visual, performing this transposition from words (written or sounds) to images.

## Concept Delimitations

In order to fully grasp the concept of visual literacy, it is important to understand some of its assumptions. First of all, **the perception is not a biological attribute or quality**. People perceive images in different ways, so they will process information in different ways. The socio-cultural context will constrain the way we see and how we process visual information. Wittgenstein stated that "to see is mainly to interpret" or to decode. Thus, what one sees is an interpretation of the object (Gil 2011, 13).

The Interpretation of the object take us to the second assumption, namely the object autonomy. Visual Literacy aims to put down the hegemony of the subjective vision of the author, and embrace the independence of objects. When we consider visual objects or events like autonomous entities, they allow un more freedom of interpretation. Roland Barthes argues that a text is made of multiple writings, coming from several different cultures, establishing dialogues and conflicts. The place where these multiple voices is organized is on the reader experience. “It is the language that speaks, not the author” (Barthes 1984).

Also, visual literacy is a trans-concept where the mutability and the ambivalence of the images play an important role. On one hand, the textual searches for a imagetive form; on the other hand, images try to find its meaning through language (Gil 2011). The linguistic meanings here are the historical social and political knowledges; the imagetive form is related to the specificities of each sign and each media.

Isabel C. Gil argues that Visual Literacy is both a competence and a strategy. It is possible because our biological capacity of seeing, but it demands studies. It is not a prerogative of a single discipline and requires multiple skills. “It is not mere utilitarian, although it can be applied whenever images studies are concerned (Gil 2011,15). This emphasizes a transdisciplinary will, allowing analysis crossing between different aesthetic and conceptual fields.

### **Study case: *The Others***

Born in Paris (1970), Olivier Culmann is a member of the Collective Tendence Floue. In 1997, he visits India for the first time to work on a photography project about primary schools. He returns in 1997 to work on a series of portraits named *Intouchables*. Until that time his photography was primarily based on the codes of photojournalism: black and white film, 35mm cameras, and humanist aesthetics<sup>2</sup>. In 2005, he moved to India, to work on the project *Watching TV*. And finally, he came back again in 2009 to live in New Deli, where he started

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<sup>2</sup> The humanist aesthetic in photography consists in a combination “of description and emotional affect to both inform and move the viewer, who may identify with the subject”. With a particular approach of social change, it is characterized for expressing humanist values like as empathy, solidarity and eventually humour. Source: Wikipedia, 2020. “Humanist photography” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanist\\_photography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanist_photography)

working on the project *The Others*. According to Oliver, *The Others* is total rupture compared to his previous works.

Instead of going to India with his own photographic culture and taking picture of Indian people to bring them back to Europe, he appropriates codes of Indian photography practices. He produces a series of Indians portraits without photographing any Indian people, but only using references of their visual culture and photographing himself.

*The Others* is a project about social codes and means of self-representation in India. The series of portraits depicts the visual specificities and the dress codes defining Indian men. In a very compartmented and complex society like India, the aim was to convey the variety of components contributing to build individual identity. It also depicts cultural practices of Indian society by lending local techniques of vernacular images production.

The self-portraits were created and transformed using many techniques of iconographic creation commonly used in India: from the practice of neighbourhood photo studio, to digital lab alterations via Photoshop and to portrait painted after photographs. Each one of these processes of iconographic recreation takes a distinctive phase in the project.

### **Phase 1: Self-Portraits**

The research begins with observing and recording the distinctive cultural signs determining features such as religion, caste, social class, occupation, regional origin. After Culmann bought clothes and accessories and visited the traditional neighbourhood photo-studios in different cities. He also collected portraits made on these studios to figure out how people play their own role, aiming to learn more about specific codes and body attitudes. Following, he photographed himself on these settings. Pictures show him wearing the outfits, mimicking the attitudes. They also present the studio space, as the theatre of these representations (figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: *The Other* - phase 1, Oliver Culmann



Figure 2: *The Other* - phase 1, Oliver Culmann

## **Phase 2: Portraits altered via digital manipulation**

In the old Indian neighborhood photo studios, it was a common practice to provide a jacket or a tie to customers as well as a variety of painted backgrounds ranging from simple patterns to complex landscapes. Using these accessories, people could add elements to build their own image during the photo session. However, in the current digital age, those

backgrounds are often computer generated. Furthermore, photographers have media storage containing elegant headless bodies, on which the client's face can be easily pasted. In other formats the client's face may be enhanced with different hairstyles, a choice of hats, turbans, as well as different colored frames. The following pictures are digital enhancement of the portraits previously showed (figure 3 and 4).

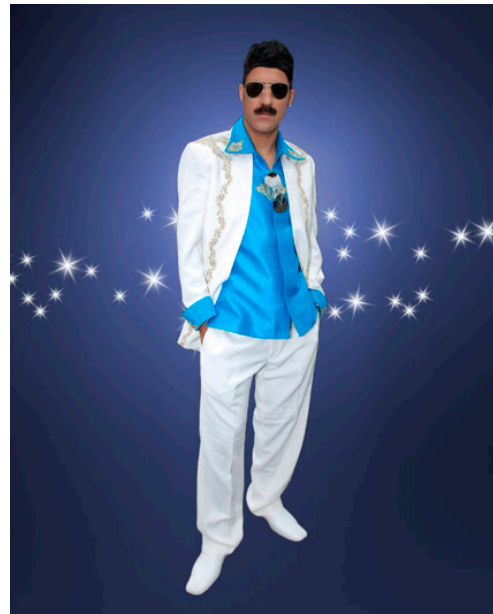
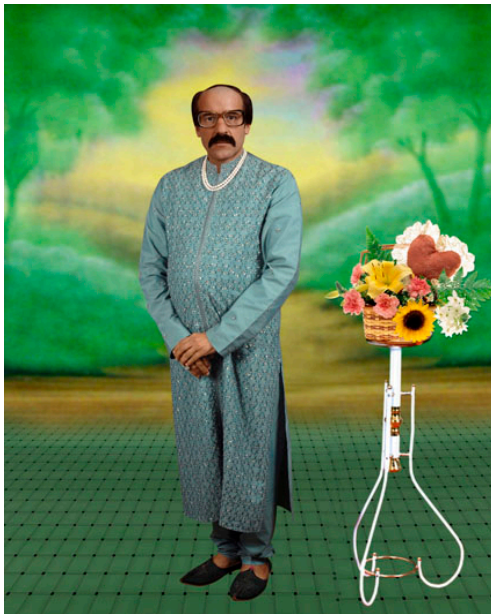


Figure 3 and 4: *The Other* - phase 2, Oliver Culmann

### **Phase 3: Restoring and colorization of torn images: reconstructing a preexistent image**

Another common practice of iconographic creation in India is the digital restoration of old and torn pictures. It is a tradition found in family pictures, where pictures damaged by the time, are reconstructed by digital labs. Often these pictures display relatives who passed away, and are hanged in houses and shops walls, to honor their ancestors. It does not matter how little credible or faithful these images are comparing to the originals. The importance of the symbolic role prevails over the belief on reality. Cullman then handed over different digital retouching labs the torn printings of some of the previous self-portraits taken in the studios. He asked them to entirely reconstruct the images, and the result is two different versions for the same (half) original image (figure 5).



Figure 5: *The Other* - phase 3, Oliver Culmann

#### Phase 4: Painting based on photographs

To go even further, and invert the process again, Culmann asked Indian commercial painters to reproduce in colors several portraits of the project (delivered in black-and-white version). Using different techniques and styles, these painters are strongly influenced by Indian tradition of painted film and advertisement posters. As in the case for digital reconstruction, the artist is free to choose colors and backgrounds (figure 6 and 7).



Figure 6 and 7: *The Other* - phase 4, Oliver Culmann

India is one of the world's most fragmented societies, and is also one of the biggest image producer in the world. The complexity of identity and identification in Indian society is somehow represented in this project. Displaying the construction of the social status through self-representation, post-production and photo reproduction practices, one can have the appropriated distance to look at Indian culture not only as a visual display, which could easily margin descriptions based on the exoticism of the other. On the contrary, one gets access to the necessary knowledge to start understanding the intricate layers of Indian visual culture. The artist, in its turn, explore the limits of photography, opening up new approaches for the medium.

“Silver grains, pixels, painting... the media does not matter. What interest me in this popular and utilitarian photography is what it tells about society. And what I realize is that it tells more things than the so-called documentary photography” (Cullman, 2014).

### **The Others and Visual Literacy**

Using an artistic project to approach Visual Literacy is just one of the many possibilities offered by the discipline. However, it could be a tricky direction. By defending the ambiguity of the images and the independence of the object, Visual Literacy can wrestle against practices in the realm of visual arts. Often in the artistic field, the idea of authorship - attached to a particular way of seeing objects and events - is too constrained to allow images to speak by themselves. Another issue of using reproducible techniques to explore visual literacy lies on a biased relation with reality. This is especially problematic with photography.

For some image theorists like Georges Didi-Huberman, the idea that photography reproduce a given reality, and, because this reality worth interest, it consequently turns photography into art is a dangerous idea. The assumption does not take into account the complexity and multiple layers of understanding of reality. Reality in photography should be considered more in terms of experience and knowledge than in terms of truth (Didi-Huberman 2012). Moreover, contrary to what semiotics defended, the relationship between objects and reality is not always mimetic neither of contiguity. Visuality is a socio-cultural practice.

The example of *The Others* is valuable in which it shows how popular imagery affords a knowledge about a culture. It shows the devices and the visual practices of (at least a part) of Indian society, bringing to the foreground messages which are not visible in a first sight. Instead of simply recording a given reality, Olivier had to understand the codes of vernacular Indian photography. The main objective of the project is to reveal how Indians see themselves, and

not how us - westerns people - represent them. Above all, we learn that the notions of authorship, truthfulness and self-representation in India are much more flexible than European Western visual representation.

As stated by Isabel Capeloa Gil, Visual Literacy is not only the capacity to obtain subjective knowledge for yourself. It is also the capacity to articulate images for the understanding of the others (Gil 2011). Artists take advantage of this strategy to convey meaningful representation. Certainly, a very powerful way to articulate images is using imagination. Imagination is different from fantasy or frivolity. Didi-Huberman argues that there is a true potential for realism within the imagination (Didi-Huberman 2012).

While looking at the first time to these colorful sparkling images, one may wonder from what tradition they came from. These glowing representations carries humor, because they are so rich with ordinary elements and at yet so unreal, that they became absurd. We need to call our imagination to grasp such eccentric layers of representations. And, strangely, the more we subvert the images, the more they become tangible.

In the final phase, the paintings can be analysed as independent objects. With our traditional visual categories, we struggle to interpret them right away. They put down the hegemony of our vision and we are just helpless before them. We are before an image experience affording knowledge, or - in Didi-Huberman terms – a dialectic image. He summarizes here how this process occurs.

If, on the contrary, one is facing an experience of this kind, the readability of the images is not given beforehand, since deprived of its clichés, its customs: first it will suppose suspense, the provisional muteness before a visual object that makes us disoriented, stripped of our ability to make sense of it, even to describe it; therefore, it will impose the construction of this silence on the language process capable of operating a critique of its own stereotypes. A well-looked image would therefore be an image that could disconcert, and then renew our language, and therefore our thoughts. (Didi-Huberman 2012, 216, my translation)

Transdisciplinary is another strategy of Visual Literacy present in *The Others*. Through a comparative process, one can access knowledge about how a culture see itself and how it perceives other cultures. Notably, the project create knowledge about cultural practices of Indian photography. This kind of knowledge allows the public to access not only social and behaviour features, but also to think about technical process, mass media image production,

digital manipulation, subjective and collective memories, and questions around self-representation.

Blending technics of Indian image practices with the representation of one original model – the artist himself - Culmann addresses a very crucial question to the field of Cultural Studies, namely, the issue of alterity. Not by chance the project is named *The Others*. This choice may sound even ironic, if one considers the auto-referential position of the artist working with self-portraits. Indeed, Indian men are not directly depicted in the pictures, but only himself, the Western artist. Because he depicts himself with a series of “Indian Filters”, we can discuss to which level is this work an appropriation of cultural codes. However, I believe that a much interesting and valuable discussion would be to ask how and with which purpose this appropriation is undertaken.

This brings us to the idea of anthropologic apprehension of culture, which opens up to a range of research fields, such as sociology, political sciences, technological aspects of the medium, and aesthetics. In the context of the 1960’s, currents of art were embracing realism. One can perceive their attempt to reach social-political relevance within works of art dealing with realism. The new paradigm of *the artist as an ethnographer* (Foster 2017, 161) is an important current in contemporary art, and therefore move the discussion focus from “other” to the “culturally other”.

In the ethnographic conception, *the other* is the social oppressed, the post-colonial. The politic of the others is initially a projection, and then it is appropriate to propose new alternatives to the cultural dominant class. We must be aware of the risks of the cultural politics of alterity. Occasionally, the *otherness* is nothing but a shapeless notion defended by the presupposed engaged artist.

Among the various possibilities of involving *the others* in the arts, some are related to a primitivistic fantasy which consider *the other* as an access to a kind of more “authentic” reality, which are out of reach for the dominant society. When the *Difference per se* become the *Identity*, we imprison the subject instead of freed it.

Among the humanities, Anthropology is the discipline which hold harder to culture as its object. Although it represents an open path for a more engaged art, which aims to balance social and historical injustices, one must be aware of the risk of romanticizing the others. The risk here is, again, the projection of values of the artist-ethnographer upon the subject, imposing practices which are not relevant to others, even politically. As stated by Hal Foster, connecting the transgressive unconscious power of the artist with the radical alterity of the cultural other, could be an alternative to use Anthropology in arts as a cultural tool (Foster 2017).

## Crossing Otherness with Realism and Illusionism

Regarding the history of art, the contribution from the aesthetic field are equally significant for the discipline of Visual Literacy. We can place the present project in an interesting cross between the Realism and the Illusionism aesthetics and the questions around the idea of Otherness developed above.

During the 1960's the art critics from the minimalism generation were hostile to realism and illusionism in arts. Furthermore, flattery towards mass culture were badly seen. Confronting this resistance, another art branch was aligned with realism and mass culture: Pop Art and the Hyperrealism current (also known as photo-realism). Both movements turn themselves to reality using preexisting photographic images of an everyday life iconography. The resulting paintings and sculptures are reappropriation of images such as commercial photography and press images. They play with the beholder's belief in the photographic medium as attesting reality. Very often the high visual impact of both aesthetics corresponds also to the imagery of advertising and mass culture consumption.

The paintings reproduction of Culmann's self-portraits draw curious similarities to the hyperrealism movement in painting. Based on the sharpness and high-resolutions capacities of photography, hyperrealism aimed to "represent reality as a codified sign", intending to show that reality itself is already absorbed in the symbolic (Hall, p.137). Often considered as an emotionless aesthetic, hyperrealism is not really concerned with simply reproducing reality in its most accurate details. Actually, it pushes reality into an extreme point, where it became unreal. It is more related to the specificities of the medium than the reality it depicts.

The term Pop Art, current epitomized by the figure of Andy Warhol as its most public figure, comes from popular culture. It is closely linked to 1960's lifestyle and the growing of consumerist society. Besides its interest in the world of everyday objects and trivial culture, Pop Art is characterized by a plastic flashy imagery, often with kitsch accents. It promotes banal objects and mass consumption symbols to the rank of artwork. Using consumers goods and mass media imagery, "Pop artists favored realism, everyday (even mundane) imagery, and heavy doses of irony"<sup>3</sup>.

The images of *The Other's* relate with Pop Art not only aesthetically, but also, in the way it appropriates objects. The photographic self-portraits are filled with irony in a kitsch

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<sup>3</sup> MOMA. 2019. "Pop Art"  
<https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/79>

aesthetic. The digital altered portraits depict many signs of consumerist society, from the ostentation of belongings to the flamboyant accessories. The “Deceptive Realism”<sup>4</sup> found in the reconstructed torn images is the start of a desubjectivation process which reach its peak with the reproduced paintings. The original referent is no longer important. What counts is the surface and the power of this mundane imagery picturing a raw reality.

The essential notion of Pop Art lies on how images are bounded to the real objects of the world. Or yet, on how images are there to represent other images (as in the case of paintings based on advertisement pieces), in a self-referential loop, reinforcing the object’s autonomy. Like in the hyperrealism, photography is the starting point and the subject of the paintings. There is no psychological intention in this strict transfer process and “the photograph functions merely as a single element among an extensive set of working steps and techniques employed”.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion and Perspectives**

With the support of an artistic project exploring photography imagery, the aim of the present paper was to contribute for developments on the field of Visual Literacy. Our initial statement was to consider such imagery as a cultural object, and not only as a product from the visual arts universe. To achieve this, we tried to highlight aspects such as the technological dimension of images and the social and historical properties of the visual artifacts examined. When all these dimensions are merged, Visual Literacy can set a very prolific exchange with the field of Cultural Studies.

What Visual literacy precisely does is to draw connections with different visual systems of representation to understand images as a cultural object. The connections built with Pop Art and Photorealism afford a knowledge that is not only aesthetic but also historical, political and cultural. This approach proves useful in expanding our understanding of images. It enhances our perception of images and our capacity to read them.

On the other hand, Cultural Studies can largely contribute to Visual Literacy, bringing to the fore the political and the cultural spheres within visual debates. Visuality is a socio-cultural practice which requires contributions from many different fields. The artistic debate

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<sup>4</sup> *Photo-Realism - Paintings, sculpture and prints from the Ludwig Collection and others*, Serpentine Gallery - 4 April - 6 may 1973. London: The Arts Council, 1973. Exhibition catalogue.

<sup>5</sup> *Macht der Ding / Power of Things - Nouveau Réalisme, Pop Art, Hyperrealismus* Das Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien in der Stadtgalerie Klagenfurt. Vienna : Herausgeber, 2001. Exhibition catalogue.

about alterity and its representations raised here is in fact a much broader discussion, already present in the cultural field. The significance of Documentary Culture and of the Anthropologic approach of culture help to address these fundamental questions of representing our culture and the other's culture.

This research has raised many questions in need of further investigation. It would be interested to explore the following topics: 1. The pedagogical possibilities of Visual Literacy as a strategy of citizenship and as a practice of the freedom of vision; 2. Explore the issues around image representation and alterity; 3. Develop the concept of *Documentary Poetics*, as visual information fostering social-engagement and enhancement of the individual's sense of being. This would be a fruitful area for further work dealing with the complexity and the power of images in our current world.

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