

Stop the Action! by Giulio Piovesan

The variety of pictures put together for *Darkside – Photographic Desire and Sexuality Photographed* (the exhibition on view at the Fotomuseum Winterthur, in Switzerland, from September 6th to November 16th, 2008) raises three questions.

First, when does nude photography become erotic or even pornographic? The answer is quite obvious: when it alludes to, hints at, or overtly documents sex. Nevertheless, such a simple answer cannot but raise another question: when does sex enter the scene? The reply must be a very subjective one, depending on what triggers someone's lust. A naked body, a pair of panties, a tongue, a drop of milk, an ankle, a whip... Anything might do. It is not our duty to go further into this matter, since it is best to leave it to the scrutiny of the scholars of psychoanalysis. Anyway, there is still the third question to take into consideration. Perhaps it is the less fascinating, but nonetheless it is the most important of all. It has to do with the *raison d'être* and the survival itself of the pictures dwelling in the darkside. So, it is pivotal to ask: why does this photographic genre still exist, notwithstanding the thriving industry of porn movies and the uncountable websites offering any kind of sex videos, spanning from the highly professional to the ludicrously homemade? Probably the answer is the same that can be accounted for the resistance that photography, of any kind, is still offering to the supremacy of the moving image. But in the case of sex photography the answer is even more vital, since motion (of one, two, or many bodies) is the very essence of sexual activity.

Still images have the power to arouse our desire because the action is not complete; we assist only to a part of the process, not the whole of it. Thus our imagination works at a faster pace, almost frantically, and we ask ourselves: what would have happened next? What part of the body would we have seen in the next frame? Would the couple have stopped after an innocent embrace, or would they have made love? Would this lips have talked to me or done more than that, maybe kissed me? Our greed for more sexual content makes us linger on the image, waiting and wishing to see more. When a movie provides motion and sound it leaves less space to our imagination than photography, so our imagination does not work hard to fill in the gaps. As a result we are less involved into the scene. If a movie sequence is a motion toward an end (orgasm), a picture is a never ending pause. What else can we do during a pause, if not looking at the scene in front of us and pondering over the sight? Unfortunately we do not have the chance to continue our journey into sex, so we are powerless, stuck somewhere (the photograph) that we cannot leave.

Darkside is the most appropriate term to group together the works by the numerous photographers who experiment(ed) in sex-related photography (the exhibition featured the works of more than 150 artists, including Nobuyoshi Araki, Man Ray, Thomas Ruff, Bill Brandt, Sarah Lucas, Cindy Sherman, Larry Sultan, Russ Meyer, Philip Lorca DiCorcia, Nan Goldin, Orlan, Richard Avedon, Andres Serrano). Not only does it refer to the absence of light that usually surrounds nakedness, it also stands for any other adjective that can be used to describe these pictures: blurred, underexposed, stolen, cropped, intimate, perverse, allusive. Even if many of them are very explicit in their relation to sex, we can feel that there is always something missing, untold, left out of the frame. A limb of the body, the next action, one of the subjects, a face. Again, we are left alone in front of the image, to cope with it and fill in the gaps. So we must set our imagination to work, imagining even more sex and becoming incapable of taking our eyes and mind off the picture.

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Images courtesy of the Fotomuseum Winterthur - www.fotomuseum.ch

