

TW: Artists' books

Hello,

Thank you for the introduction <3 and the invitation.

This is my first time at the Exemplaïre(s) Biennial after having heard a lot about it, and I am delighted to speak at this event that involves students, and that deals with the question of book selection.

My research project owes a lot to the students and this question of selection, because it started in the context of preparing a new course I was invited to teach in Brussels.

I like to tell where this research project comes from, because like everything else, a research project doesn't just fall out of the sky, and mine first presented itself as a problem: how to give a course around the book, and the artists' book in particular, without repeating a very problematic canon that puts forward almost exclusively white, cis, hetero men, working in Western countries, that we still call "developed" which is so problematic by the way. Canons that I had learned myself and that I found in the existing books on the subject at the time.

I don't know if I still need to explain why this is a problem... I have to tell you that I'm really happy that every year the students I meet are more and more informed, and often already more critical and sharp than I am on many political issues and social struggles. So, lots of love on you!

And since then, things have really started to move, so there is hope!

What terrified me when I started preparing this course a few years ago, and continues to give me work, is suddenly realizing the responsibility you have as a teacher, or as a lecturer, and the weight of a selection.

To choose is to be in a position of privilege. Sometimes temporary, sometimes very partial, but still a position of power. Of inclusion and exclusion, as I read on the wall of Kayfa Ta's exhibition that we saw yesterday.

So I started teaching by telling my students what I was encountering... or not. I was talking about absences. The glaring absence of women in the stories around the artists' books, and the absence of racialized and queer people...

I happened to go to a conference on artists' books and ask about these absences. And a specialist answered me anyway that women were not too interested in the medium of the book... And this kind of answer, it is serious.

SPEAKING VOLUMES

And then, in the course of my research, I began to find traces. I'm not going to be able to tell you all this story, its details and anecdotes - because we'd still be here tomorrow... I could summarize it, but in fact I don't want to tell a story without these details and anecdotes.

I don't want to tell you a smooth story, with a big H, big individual figures, ... On the contrary, I've learned to give a lot of importance to what seems anecdotal, to what

we don't understand right away, to the gaps and all those forms that we learn to ignore, and to leave a little bit aside.

In preparing this course, I was really struck by the things I found, they overwhelmed me, and their particularities, but also the need to mend, to embroider around the holes in the stories, made it more than just preparing a course, these objects deserved a longer time, a closer listening and often creativity... and so it became a research project!

In this research project, I told you that I am interested in stories, in the plural, and not History.

As in "making stories" (faire des histoires in French).

This research is full of great stories, some pretty juicy stories, ... but here I felt like taking a bag that I've also been carrying on my back, since even before my research started, and emptying it.

It is the bag of bad experiences. The ones that give you a feeling that something is wrong. The ones you have to learn to deconstruct in order to discover, most of the time, that the cause is not you (there must be something wrong with me) but the relationship you are caught in, the situation, the system. Stories through which we grow, and if we are lucky enough to be equipped with a feminist-decolonial-anti-capitalist toolbox, we get stronger.

I asked myself: where do bad experiences go? They often end up buried in a drawer, or in a complaint email that is quickly swept aside...

Haunted by some past experiences, which stick in my craw, I decided to transform them: into words, into spells, into emancipatory stories, and share them to break the silence that surrounds them and their power.

For that, and to avoid any defamation without minimizing their violence, because their violence is real, I'm going to borrow from fiction, from the genre of the horror story, told by the fireside, in the mountains with Mary Shelley, or in her teenage bedroom with the horror stories books which were very fashionable when I was a teenager ;)

Actually, I'm not a fan of the horror genre, I'm still pretty fearful and I spent my childhood being afraid to be afraid... I think I just project too much. But it's also a quality :)

So I reassure you, it won't be too hardcore, I'll try not to reproduce on you the violence I'm going to talk about. But I also know that sensitivities vary from one person to another according to their past experiences.

So I'm going to use a tool that has been developed in the feminist, decolonial, anti-validated and activist circles: the trigger warning, or TW, or trauma warning, which allows people to be warned when potentially violent content is going to be told or shown, so that they can prepare themselves to receive it and possibly protect themselves by closing their eyes, plugging their ears, leaving the room.

It works like this: in this presentation, there will be references to:

rape culture

reproduction of violence

harassment

tokenism

male gaze

white gaze

abuse of power, including artist status

I'll let you know more precisely when they arrive, and this tool will also help me to identify problematic situations. Because identifying them is already a very important step.

I may reassure you already, it will be mostly about the relationship between people and books, and how the book, the act of publishing, the stories found in it can sometimes be vectors of violence.

And research too.

When one does research, one is likely to find oneself “exploring”, “discovering”, “exposing”... — gestures that are part of the continuity of a history of patriarchal and colonial science, of exploitation of bodies and of objectification.

I'll tell you a first story: a few years ago I participated in two weeks of research, in a high place of the book, with a lot of researchers gathered to talk about artists' books. I won't tell you where and who, because these are not isolated situations but systemic issues. Anyway, in this research context, “very precious” books were often handled while wearing blue disposable latex gloves. During a presentation on an artist's book about a naked woman's body and all the sexual fantasies the artist was projecting, I could hear this colleague start to get excited and talk about the book as a woman's body to be opened... The scene still gives me chills, and since then I can't get those blue gloves touching that book out of my memory as if I were doing a gynecological examination.

We gathered around a large glass table where other books were locked up - some allied books, like *Girls Like Us* magazine — and the glass surface of the table bore the fingerprints of the researchers present... Fingerprints that would have to be cleaned every morning by invisible workers, whose schedules were made so that they would not be seen, who also wore disposable blue latex gloves, which, when worn by their hands, had a much less prestigious and recognized status than those of the researchers' hands.

The images you see here are not directly related to the presentation, but I took them in those famous two weeks, and they just added a layer. You can still see a book called “Please touch” on which you can see a breast...

For the next two stories, after much hesitation, I'm going to do without pictures.

In preparing this talk, I realized that the experiences that weighed heavily in my bag were often related to book selections, awards...

I need to give you some background. I was coordinator of the Fernand Baudin Prize, a prize for the most beautiful books in Brussels and Wallonia, so I was quite involved in “beautiful books” at the beginning of my career. I don’t really have any horror stories to tell you about my experience at the Fernand Baudin Prize, except for my very precarious contract which contrasted with the prestige and the facade of this type of project.

TW: harassment + male gaze

On the other hand, it led me to be invited one day as a member of the jury for the World’s Most Beautiful Books Award — this title, I swear, is not science fiction! A World’s Most Beautiful Books Award, based in Europe, in a rich country... So it’s not science fiction but maybe we could discuss a neo-colonial genre...

Anyway, I’m participating in this jury, where we had to judge about 600 books coming from 32 countries, mostly from Europe and a bit from other continents, in one day and a half, with 5 other members coming mostly from European countries and reading only the Latin script. No comment.

Decisions had to be made quickly (this is wrong — TW: working in a hurry is rarely a good thing). Gradually a “beautiful” book moves up the selection and ends up in the final selection.

It was an artist’s book composed of found photos, collages, beautiful photos, all in an attractive Nordic design. When I took the time to go through the 330 pages of the book and the narrative created by its structure, I discovered after a series of youth and wedding photos of a couple, a long series of photos of the woman. They were taken in an obsessive way, in multiple close-ups and zooms, where we see this woman undressing, taken naked or in her underwear, with a lot of emphasis on her breasts, in the private and daily context of a bedroom. The photos are presented in contact sheet mode, with about thirty photos covering each page. The woman’s poses were sometimes awkward (a person who appears to be trying to get dressed under the eyes of an invasive camera) and sometimes unnatural (a person who follows posing directions without much conviction). His face is exposed, and displays expressions that are difficult to interpret but that tend rather towards the side of the subdued pose, of questioning, sometimes bordering on exasperation and embarrassment. These photos cover the pages of the book, in the same way that they covered the walls of a room in the house, as evidenced by a large photo reminiscent of crime scenes, where we discover a wall covered with photos, like a killer studying his prey. This is followed by a series of collages with the same photos of this naked female body, where parts of her body are reassembled, duplicated, cut and pasted, creating monster bodies. The pages following this series show sculptures based on these collages. And finally the book ends with a series of large full page photos of an abandoned camp in the forest with the remains of dead animals burned on spikes. So that’s a bit of the atmosphere.

On the last page of the book, a text by the artist explains that these “works” were made by the husband, whose name the book bears, and tells of the shame the wife felt about these images and her husband’s attitude. We learn about her attempt to destroy them, and finally her separation from her husband, his flight and disappearance from her life. The artist then mentions that friends of the couple had given her the photos and permission to use them.

TW: reproduction of violence

Thus, although it is known that the woman was not satisfied with these photos, the artist published them.

The republication of these photos reproduces the gesture of the husband on the body of a woman who was already ashamed of these images when they were made, which had taken place in a private space. The act of publishing them transfers them into a public space. The same violence is thus repeated, and even multiplied, her body and her shame are now made public through an edition.

And by drawing on the husband's staging, these walls covered in photos, as a principle of layout for the book; by photographing his sculptures as contemporary art pieces, all in an artist's book that bears the husband's name, this edition glorifies the husband's work, giving him the status of an artist. A seemingly all-powerful status.

The deluxe version of the edition, sold for around 500€, is even a box with which you can continue to "play" with photos of the woman and fake archive documents, such as a bra strap...

Despite discussions between the members of the jury, of which I was a part, the book has been awarded, it has won several competitions, and there are descriptions on sites such as "What happened with [the woman] marked [her husband] as an artist [...] These images stage the symbolic death of [the woman] generating in her place a battalion of phantasmagorical monsters. She becomes a totem of bulbous flesh almost without head, an orgy of breasts, a psychosexual grotesque. [...] [The woman] survives only in the form of a disembodied mammary phallus that looks strangely like a modernist sculpture.

What is clear is this: [the husband's] long, obsessive relationship with his wife has allowed him to develop a voice that has resulted in a powerful and complex work."

So, well: help...

... I hope that today this kind of thing wouldn't happen anymore... and at the same time, looking at her site to prepare my presentation, I see that her publisher continues to make artists' books based on photos of naked and wet female bodies...

And this is not anecdotal, it is in fact part of a tradition of using "amateur", "found" photos, and a certain culture of voyeurism legitimized and celebrated in the field of the artist's book.

TW: rape culture

Another story. That of a book whose main character is himself a book, acting as a human being, who genders in the masculine, and who has "developed an obsession with the physical beauty of other books." The protagonist slips one night into a room full of publications of a contest of most beautiful books "deeply asleep." He then approaches "on tiptoe, so as not to wake them, but close enough." "They hardly seemed aware of being re-examined. So I took my time." "I was going from one book

to another. It won't shock anyone, I hope, to learn that I couldn't help but open them, very delicately, double page after double page."

So the story starts off strong with one character taking advantage of the fact that others are asleep to touch them. In fact, there are references to Sleeping Beauty throughout the book, both in the text and in the pictures.

TW: patriarchy, male gaze

In this book, we also see pictures of the award-winning books in different situations, which I will describe to you. You can see them in different hands. Those of a baby, but also those of white men, in their large living rooms, sitting on their sofas (dressed, I want to note), leafing through a book ... The women, on the other hand, also white, are lying down, perhaps even asleep, on a sofa, with an open book on their chest. Then another, lying flat on a solarium bench, naked, an open book on her buttocks. Further on we find a white man, with a rather smart hat, browsing a book on a table covered with maps. Further on, several hands with red painted nails are holding a book in a bed, bare arms (we don't see the rest), one of them laughing with her mouth wearing a farting red lipstick matching the nails. Then an overhanging photo of three women lying on and in a book-shaped bed, in evening gowns. Further on, three pairs of female legs, white, naked, wearing only pink pumps, stomping on books against a background of crumpled satin fabrics.

TW: token

Further on, a black hand (holding a book about Africa of course, "the one that didn't deal with a subject [of the country of the Prize]"). Further on, a woman with a book on her head (???), then a woman's legs with a book held between her legs (between her knees, I assure you, and she is wearing pants) ...

A masterly representation of the "male gaze" (and white gaze), ultra stereotyped, on the verge of ridicule.

TW: power abuse

And throughout, the story continues:

"Until then I was very happy with my explorations, which, if you think about it, carry their own kind of risk. Thank God, all these beauties remained deeply asleep."

[GREAT] Maybe that made me a little too confident, or careless." [!!!] In any case, when I embraced the largest and heaviest volume I've encountered so far, with its mighty cover [...] I had trouble pulling it aside and scratched it so unhappily that it woke up."

And then, a turn of events: "After a while I noticed that the guy was quietly whispering in my direction, in a low, manly voice. [It took me a while to realize that he was trying to seduce me. He was probably under the influence of I don't know what drugs]" "But he turned around to make sure that I had noticed his good looks. [...]"

Then it opened, showing its double pages of impressively rich visual documents. I felt lost in a sea of images" "Call me a coward, but I began a slow retreat" "I lay under the table for a while, until my anxiety began to give way to remorse. Had I missed the opportunity of a lifetime? Hadn't the jury praised [this book] for its complex personality, the result of a masterful editing of the material?"

This is unfortunately one of the reasons for a lot of abuse, especially in art school, by admired people with positions of power, and therefore with unpunished behavior. There is no need to be called a coward, it is perfectly ok to refuse and run away...

The book ends with “Glad everything went well, I left the sleeping beauties...” and in the end he still ends the night with one of them.

I’m done with this book, and with these practices that seem to use editorial objects as metaphors to release fantasies that are actually quite common...

Because yes, all this reflects a REALITY, and it’s a known reality in the graphic design field. Stories of star designers abusing their power, of teachers, etc., can certainly be told at break time. And I believe, I hope, that things are changing. And they are changing thanks to you, and your incredible projects - Les mots de trop, balance ton école d’art, Black flowers, ...

And it would be great if people who have privileged positions and can make choices would take responsibility, and together we would develop other practices, emancipatory practices.

So I’m done with my violent stories. I will finish with books that give strength and that heal.

Because the relationship with the body is important, I chose this double page by the artist Christina Hung, in the book “Domain Errors”, which proposes to take 10 minutes, and hands that heal, to change.

Since we don’t have 10 minutes, I’ll keep going!

How do we think about art-ist books with a culture of consent?

[I PUT ON SILVER GLOVES]

I want to share with you a great book that I recently discovered thanks to Enz@ Le Garrec, aka Enzanita, who co-wrote the graphic design. It is the book of an artist who is actually still a student, Lois Soleil.

I’m going to put on other gloves than the ones we saw earlier, because fortunately the universe of gloves is infinite and full of surprises!

This book is called “Touch me with gloves, I’m not read yet”. This book contains beautiful poems, one of which I particularly love, which starts with:

“There is magic in your subtitles”

“In between the lines you are a poem”

... but the reason I brought it is because it’s the first book I’ve come across that uses a Trigger Warning.

And those kinds of editorial practices, they’re thoughtful practices. And it moves me.

[I PUT ON RED GLOVES]

When you approach a book,
When you make a book,

Think about your privileges, and put on strange gloves instead, where nothing is to be taken for granted and “normal”. Check that the people who are represented in your book are willing to be in it - if they are dead, at least ask yourself if it would make them happy / good / ...

Let's avoid the reproduction of violence through the act of publishing.

When you don't know something, learn to simply say “I don't know”...

To ask (oneself) questions.

There, my bag is empty.

Fiouuu

Now I'm opening the office of complaints and laments (Sarah Ahmed)

:-)