

María María Acha-Kutscher

WOMANKIND



By combining archive, postproduction and *fake*, the works of María María Acha-Kutscher (Lima, 1968) seek to give new meaning to those imaginaries that have constructed a discriminatory, detrimental history of women since the invention of photography, in which they appear as if pushed into the background within hegemonic, paternalistic narratives.

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[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



Les Spectaculaires / Alice E. Doherty
Alice The Wonder, 2019
Colourised photographic collage

This exhibition brings together various series of works under the title of *Womankind* (2010–2015), a long-term project with which María María Acha-Kutscher (Lima, 1968) provides a critical analysis of those imaginaries that have constructed a discriminatory, paternalistic history of women since the birth of photography.

Her working method consists of resignifying several archive images from highly different sources and then introducing subtle formal changes into these. Accordingly, as in Agnès Varda's cinematographic fable, it could be argued that María María Acha-Kutscher has become a "gleaner" of the detritus ingested by this male, heterosexual, white cultural hegemony that created the visual, literary and public stereotypes of women between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The exhibition includes eighteen photographic collages and the installation *365 Days* (2012), which outlines a sequence of images in the form of a year-long diary that invites spectators to construct associations based on their particular iconographies.

Therefore, the colourised collages of *Les Spectaculaires*, two of them created specifically for La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, portray women pathologised as "abnormal" by the clinical, theological and social systems at the time. Cornered like monsters and displayed in circus shows, these women exemplify the processes of persecuting difference and therapeutising abnormalities that proliferated throughout Europe after the Industrial Revolution, in which the freak show was one of their overriding episodes.

On the other hand, *Derruidas* (2011) portrays two women in two ruined architectural spaces, perhaps recovering some object before it is lost forever or maybe bidding farewell to their former places of residence.

Series 2 (2011), 3 (2012) and 4 (2013) represent a tour through household rooms, places of socialisation and areas of entertainment or knowledge, in which women can be seen in various attitudes, at times imbued with a certain pathos of melancholy and at others deliberating or absorbed. The characterisation of the "feminine universe"—a male chauvinist

epithet—as a territory free from the logic of reason, as well as the myth of Bovaryism, in other words, harmfully ascribing women to a sort of perpetual state of unproductive daydreams, together with the cliché of youthful beauty and class elegance, are here literally transformed into a mirror of how prevailing cultural representations historically typified women, separating them from any possibility of political action and positioning them in a territory of existential solitude or a state of limbo outside of chronological paths.

Finally, *Maybe 1* (2015) portrays a woman surveying an urban landscape from the ledge of a building. Factory chimneys, church spires and housing rooftops can be seen in the background. Her bold silhouette appears set against a sky of industrial pollution and uniform clouds, against the productive pulse of new capitalist cities.

WOMANKIND

Tomás Ruiz-Rivas

Womankind is one of the lines of work and research that makes up the oeuvre of María María Acha-Kutschner. It comprises several series of photographic collages featuring women produced between 2010 and 2015. A total of ten series have been published, although it also contains unpublished pieces and an abundance of unfinished material. As she herself has claimed in a statement that can be read on her website,¹ her objective is “to redefine the meaning of the images upon which the history of women has been built since the invention of photography, where traditionally they have been relegated to the background in paternalistic, hegemonic stories”.

The collages are made up of a wide range of archival materials: photographs downloaded from the Internet or taken by the artist, clippings from women’s magazines, such as publications on fashion or decoration, and less frequently other types of publications, such as books. Her work process involves collecting thousands of images and carefully selecting from among these a variety of main figures, backgrounds and elements to be combined in each piece. Given that her aim is for the final image to be true, these components must possess similar formal qualities, such as texture and range, so that their assembly is imperceptible once they have been superimposed.

The result is the construction of a very poetic imaginary in which the presence of women in photography not only subtly shifts from the margins to the centre, but also appears in roles that contradict official history. These women appear alone in most of the collages, almost always in relaxed attitudes. The presence of women of diverse ancestry can also be observed, especially in her first series: white European or American women, oriental and Afro-descendant women. The allusion to post-colonialism through these characters is due both to the social complexity of their country of origin,

¹ <http://www.acha-kutschner.com/womankind/portada.html>

Peru, and their second adopted homeland, Mexico, as well as to their own family history, which contains an ancestral mix of Spanish, German, Chinese and sub-Saharan African origins.

Another constant in all her series, even in *Les Spectaculaires*, is the relationship between the main figures in the collages and culture, or more specifically the representations of women in high and low culture: paintings, sculptures, photographs, porcelain figures, dolls, magazine covers, etc. For example, the Afro-American woman in *Series 2* who can be seen sitting in a garden next to an elegantly set table: alongside several porcelain figures, there is a classic sculpture to which she has turned her back, as if dialogue between the two was impossible. *Series 2* also contains a collage featuring a young woman who is writing literally surrounded by a mountain of books. There are also small female sculptures around her and a painting by the pre-Raphaelite painter Waterhouse. But none of this distracts the concentration of this main figure.

The relationship between the women and these works of art is not without tension: sometimes they turn their backs, while at other times it appears as if the main figure in the image is cross-examining the works she is observing, questioning, as the author does, the archetypes of herself offered to her by art. This is the case, among others, of the second collage in *Series 4*. Although there are other collages featuring women who are painting, modelling or interacting in less predictable ways with other images, such as a young woman carrying the head of the Statue of Liberty in a wheelbarrow or a group of women unearthing a classical sculpture, also of a women, both from the series *365 días*.

Womankind therefore suggests a dual reading: as forged documents—we will soon return to this point—they question and transform the way in which the image of women has been constructed in photography. But underneath this, each image raises specific questions about the relationship of women to patriarchal culture. The project is firstly part of the history of feminist art and secondly part of the tradition



Womankind / Maybe 1, 2015
Digital photographic collage



365 Days / Day 72, 2012
Digital photographic collage



Womankind / Series 4/2, 2013
Digital photographic collage



365 Days / Day 320, 2012
Digital photographic collage

of photographic collage, from the pictorialists of the 19th century who sometimes resorted to collage² to artists of the 1920s such as Hannah Hoch, Dora Maar or Greta Stern. Although I believe the most visible influence is that of Max Ernst's *Une semaine de bonté*, both because of its formal perfection and sophisticated imagery.

Beyond this initial interpretative layer, three other genealogies of *Womankind* can be found underneath this that will allow us to bring more complex conclusions to its diverse series.

The first has to do with archives, with art that approaches archives as a device for producing knowledge and, above all, exercising power. This is not an unknown subject. In *An Archival Impulse* (2004)³, Hal Foster detected a desire to “connect what cannot be connected”. He believed there is a desire to explore a lost past in the archival impulse, to collect and order its various signs (at times practically, other times paradoxically), to check what can be left for the present.

Firstly, *Womankind* consists not in reorganising an archive, but responding to the premises raised by Foster. In other words, it assumes the anomic fragmentation of records that preserve the memory of our society as a condition that not only has to be represented, but also has to be worked through.

The second genealogy refers to the notion of postproduction as developed by Bourriaud in his book of the same title (2002)⁴ and the exhibition *Playlist* (2004),⁵ and in more general terms to the transformation of work in the late 20th century and shift of the centre of gravity in an economy from industry to the tertiary sector.

² For example, Oscar G. Rejlander and his work *The Two Ways of Life* (1857), a montage print using more than 30 negatives.

³ Foster, Hal. *An Archival Impulse*. The MIT Press. October (Autumn, 2004). Vol. 110, pp. 3-22.

⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Postproduction*. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002.

⁵ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Playlist* (catalogue). Paris: Palais de Tokyo / Éditions Cercle d'Art, 2004.

The prefix “post” for Bourriaud does not indicate here an overcoming or negation, but a field of action: postproduction artists do not produce new images, but “invent protocols of use” for which they already exist. “It is a matter of seizing all the codes of the culture, all the forms of everyday life, the works of the global patrimony, and making them function.”

There is a direct link between the emergence of postproduction in the visual arts and the development of industrial techniques for printing and digitising images. From the invention of halftone and lithography in the late 19th century, as well as personal 35 mm cameras in the 1920s, to the universalization of digital technologies in mobile phones, our everyday environment has become saturated with visual signs. Such a proliferation makes it necessary, again quoting Bourriaud, for artists to direct their efforts to “produce meaning from this chaotic mass” and to produce “an itinerary, within cultural protocols”.

Postproduction also warns us of a more far-reaching change: the centre of the economy no longer rests on producing objects, but on managing information and human relationships. The curator is a result of this new system, otherwise known as Post-Fordism. But so is a wide range of creative practices that recover a central role for the artist in the production chain of meaning based on highly diverse aesthetic, political positions. The responses to this single issue are collaborative art, alternative spaces, the “archival impulse”, museums as work and of course the complete range that Bourriaud includes in the term “postproduction”.

The third genealogy can be summarised by the term “fake”, the false, the falsified. Not in the sense of a falsified work or illegal copy, or, to split hairs, a conceptual work that is a copy of another work, but in the sense that Jorge Luis Marzo gave to it in the exhibition *Fake*⁶ and in the book *La competencia de lo falso*⁷: “an action limited in time and

⁶ Marzo, Jorge Luis. *Fake: It is not true, it is not a lie*. Valencia: IVAM, 2016.

⁷ Marzo, Jorge Luis. *La competencia de lo falso. Una historia del fake*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2018.

developed in the social, cultural or political field that aims to disseminate a literary or audiovisual story or statement by using techniques of deception or camouflage and posing as true what is actually fictitious.”

The fake as an artistic resource is widespread: Darko Maver, a Serbian artist invented by Eva and Franco Mattes who disappeared in strange circumstances in 1999; the fake news and impersonations of the Yes Men collective; Mike, a mysterious character invented by the French artist Alain Declercq that eventually led to the artist’s arrest in 2005 because of his journeys between Cairo and Washington DC; or works by Joan Fontcuberta, such as *Fauna* (1985-87), in which he introduced a false scientific archive in natural science museums, or *Deconstructing Obama* (2004), a fictitious story in which he himself assumes the personality of an associate of Bin Laden, introducing the fake into the flow of real news (or not) by manipulating press photographs.

María María Acha-Kutscher also plays with the indexical dimension of photography. The photographic image, requiring the presence of an author in the place of the events and the mediation of a technological device functioning as a guarantor, today retains its aura of truthfulness: an objective testimony. But although the crowning moment of the work for most artists exploring the fake is when its deception is revealed, for Acha-Kutscher it is essential that her collages circulate anonymously online and are accepted as authentic documents, thereby constituting a new archive in which women occupy the place they would have deserved in our imaginary.

Considering the importance of the distribution system is central to Acha-Kutscher’s work. She has worked with the capacity for meaning in each channel in her various projects, simultaneously introducing her work in spaces dedicated to art exhibitions, in public spaces, in networks and in activist contexts in which feminist demands are materialised as such.

Indignadas, for example, not only provided feminist collectives with images to disseminate and strengthen their struggle, it also created a viral effect arising from the censorship of an exhibition in Lima.⁸ It has even led to a visual language that is now identified with feminism and reproduced by thousands of designers, illustrators and artists throughout the world. *Womankind* can similarly be presented as a poetic exercise, when the fake is revealed from the very first moment, but it also operates as a strategy of feminist subversion, as its images come to infiltrate the archives of online users as real. As Marzo claims at the conclusion of his book, deception in art is a mechanism for producing meaning. It is a strategy for creation.

The images of *Womankind* are effective because they establish production dynamics between the three aforementioned genealogies: archives, postproduction and fake. But at the same time they achieve a poetic tension that arouses emotions in us at levels that are difficult to rationalise. *Les Spectaculaires*, a “freaks parade” in which monsters radiate beauty and dignity, or *365 días*, the most ambitious series of the project, confirm this capacity for the poetic. As I mentioned elsewhere,⁹ the former is a collection of portraits of women affected by some kind of abnormality: one has no arms, another no legs, others are covered in hair, or are abnormally short, or tall, or obese. These women worked in circus shows at the beginning of the 20th century and, paradoxically, enjoyed a more affluent and independent life than most “normal” women at the time. The collages present them to us clothed in great dignity and establish disturbing relationships among ideas of beauty, disease, violence and power.

365 días, on the other hand, comprises many images produced over the course of a year in the form of a diary. These are small prints, 8.44 × 11 cm, that demand solitary observation. The series is conceived as a single work that the spectator

⁸ Her letter of complaint was shared on social media by more than 3,000 Latin American artists and activists in a few days.

⁹ Ruiz-Rivas, Tomás. *Les Spectaculaires*. Ed. Asimétricas. Madrid 2011.

must carefully explore in order to discover the infinite number of narrative lines hidden within it. Moreover, each person will discover different relationships among the images and will construct a unique story about each woman from the subtle manipulations produced by the artist. Acha-Kutscher achieves her aim of creating a parallel universe in this work, as immense as Balzac's *The Human Comedy*, in which the women of the past finally speak to us in their own voice.

Curator: Valentín Roma

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Palau de la Virreina
La Rambla, 99. 08002 Barcelona**

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