

“LIVING THE IMAGES” **(Stories of the Back of the Mind)**

The Countess of Castiglione

November 2018, at the inauguration of Paris Photo, in the wonderful setting of the Grand Palais, I wander like a truffle dog, rigorously alone, among the maze of the stands of the best gallery owners in the world.

Being alone is one of the requirements to truly get in touch with the artworks.

In fact, there is never great concentration and intimacy when you are accompanied by someone, despite being your partner; mental energy is inattentive, so you don't really devote yourself to works of art, don't deepen the dialogue with a gallery owner and don't get lost in your emotions.

You feel distracted by the reaction of the other by his pace and curiosity that are never yours: conversely, creating a “bubble” around me preserves the flow of thoughts and the enjoyment of the artworks, reasons about yourself and your desire.

A photograph, placed behind the desk of an important London gallery owner, James Hyman, who will later become one of my trusted gallerists, captures my attention: *The Countess of Castiglione*, portrayed in a rather peculiar way, holding a small frame with an oval hole, similar to a monocle, from which she watched...

Portrayed by one of the pioneers of French photography, Pierre-Louis Pierson, on the occasion of the debut of the opera *Un Ballo in Maschera: “È scherzo od è follia”*, composed by Giuseppe Verdi and held at the Apollo Theater in Rome on the 17th February 1859.

Watching that photo it was like a dip in the heart that powerfully interrupted my indiscriminate hunt, as proof that most of the works I have collected are the result of occasional encounters and situations. The rare exceptions concern “historical” photographers, that I consider fundamental for the completeness of my research on the topic of Gender Identity.

Then, the delicate phase of the negotiation begins: it is often played on several fronts, both psychological and real.

The interest for the work declared by the gallerist represents one of the key moments; it is the moment of listening, questions, doubts and, last but not least, of the price: it is here that we measure the concrete interest of both of us to conclude the negotiation.

The gallerist's attitude and his way of posing is decisive for my own choice; persistent gallery owners are not my favorite, indeed I prefer a neutral, fact based attitude, where emotions leak out but are also controlled.

Then, I felt in love with the photo and emerged the desire to possess it, but even the fear of losing it. In other words, the instinctual aspect predominates: you are already decided, you just have to bring home the object in the best possible way, or in any case at the value I attributed to the artwork.

The request for the best price opens the negotiation phase, where the rational part rules; each negotiation is different because each gallerist has his own specificities, method, openings and rigidities.

Dealing with a gallery owner who knows your story, the history of your collection, and interests, is easier since you go straight to the core; the price obtained is certainly the best you can obtain. Conversely, in the negotiation with a gallerist you don't know, gives you the advantage of presenting yourself as a potential new customer. In this case the attention of the gallery owner is higher, but the risk consists in the low transparency and reliability of the information you can acquire about an artwork.

The lack of a previous relationship with a gallerist removes the typical complicity and confidence of the discussion on the quality and importance of the selected artwork, as well as the mutual trust, which is the result of an over time consolidated knowledge and appreciation.

The price for this photograph was agreed with some difficulty that arose from “pricing” a photograph that has not market references and has a high symbolic worth, which is very difficult to evaluate. This fact was extremely clear to both of us.

We will realize that the impossibility of finding and specifying the economic value is given by the symbolic. And that the possibility of openly demonstrating something that would be the unconscious, but which therefore ceases to exist, is the symbolic¹.

Suddenly, the price came out from James, which was obviously affected by the goodness of the purchase price he paid, but not only.

Then, I decided to buy this photo in this new situation for me, unsure about the opportunity to insert this image apparently far away from my collecting research. Where were the empathy, the libidinal drive and my identification with “a piece of me”?

Turning a new leaf and walking towards new spaces inevitably leads to uncertainties and fears and this is also true in collecting, at least in my case, but it also represents a proof of the therapeutic and self-analysis power of art, which can help us to investigate better ourselves and our inner drives.

After a few years in which I liked the photo as if I were in a “tunnel”, or rather in a darkness that prevented me from bringing out the impulse that led me to buy the photo, my awareness of why I felt the desire to possess this artwork emerged.

The essence of this photo turns around introspection, which also represents the cornerstone and the background of all my collecting research about *Gender Identity*, which is declined in five aesthetical categories: *Eros & Thanatos*, *Neutral Identity*, *Fetishism*, *Uncanny* and *Melancholy*.

¹ Cfr. Jean Baudrillard.



Pierre-Louis Pierson, "Scherzo di follia (The Countess of Castiglione)", original cliché verre from 1863 ca., enlargement from 1930 ca., gelatin silver print, ©Collezione Ettore Molinaro. Only two known prints in the world: the second copy is kept in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

Vivian Maier

Arte Fiera Bologna 2017, I was in the booth of Valeria Bella Gallery and I observed a Luigi Ghirri's vintage photograph belonging to the Cantergiani Portfolio. I liked it: it represented a small faded color portrait of a pin up woman lying on the ground on a dirt road.

It was intriguing and I decided to buy it, despite its high cost.

After a few days, I delved into the history of the “Cantergiani portfolio” and with some disappointment; I realized that Ghirri had created this portfolio of ten photos in an edition of over 100 copies, as Christmas gifts for the best customers of his insurer.

This fact made me discover that the photo was worthless and, as if by magic, my desire towards that photo vanished completely. The aura of that image was no longer the same for me and the fact that it was born for a commercial operation, did not make it more attractive. Then, the issue of rarity of a photograph as a decisive element in my purchase choices, came back strongly to the fore. So, I decided to withdraw from the purchase: I talked about it with the gallerist and together we agreed about the possibility of making a change with another photograph or, very correctly, the refund of the sum i paid.

Some time ago, I had seen two works by Vivian Maier, an American nanny who, in the 50s, worked and selfportayed with her Hasselblad, in a sort of ante-litteram “selfie”, by using also mirrors, reflections, shadows and similars.

In the photo that get my attention, to put it with Roland Barthes, the *punctum* is represented by the mirror of a powerful car, exactly in the center of the composition, where appears the “visual synthesis” of her life and work, that is she with two children sitting in a stroller.

I was fascinated by the stories of her many negatives found accidentally after her death, the fact that she had never printed an image in life, nevertheless I kept asking myself the sense of my interest in this photo.

So I was again in a odd situation: nothing of my past was present, there was no libidinal transport for the subject, and perhaps not even the desire to possess it.

With amazement, and after profound reflections and serious doubts about the possibility that this work represents myself, I still decided to throw myself into the fray and purchased it.

The introspective feature of Vivian Maier's work took on the dominant role in which I identified myself, despite the resistance due to the compulsion to repeat the strong, violent and fulfilling emotions of the purchases of the past.

In fact, I found that the link between Vivian Maier's work and my way to collecting was the purpose of representing ourselves through a symbolic projection of our introspective part on “target” images.

I believe that the great challenge of collecting is to expose ourselves, with sincerity, consistency and without hesitation, enhancing what a collector feels he is and what he can bring to the community, always in a great game of mirrors and references and without fear of prejudice.

Acting like a mirror, the collection can follow the flow of your life only where the “obsessiveness” of some artistic choices represents the exorcisation of some inner drives, which are pleasant but limiting, since they absorb a large part of your identification potential.

The “liberation” also takes place following a process of exhaustion of the potential for enjoyment given by the represented and possessed image.

In fact, the key element of the replacement process is the emotional “tension” that an image triggers within us. When it becomes weak, the effect provoked is boredom and is repeated in other fruitions, so that one wonders if he has exorcised that same inner drive, through an obsessive and repeated consumption of it.



Vivian Maier, “Self-portrait Chicago”, 1957, 31x31, cm, gelatin silver print, ed. 9/15, Courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro, © John Maloof.

Jean-Baptiste Sabatière Blot

During the preview of an auction, held in 2017 at Sotheby's Parisian office, I found myself quite randomly admiring a small relic, exposed in a glass cabinet.

A full plaque daguerreotype from around 1850, a photograph of the French miniaturist and friend of Daguerre, Jean-Baptiste Sabatière Blot, representing a *post mortem* portrait of a young girl lying on her deathbed and showing a Canovian face.

I remember the surprise in seeing this splendid image, still preserved in its original support, with hand-painted passepartout mounted in a "French" frame and with the label "Beau Palais 65" on verso, dating back to the time of the photograph.

I immediately recognized the rarity and refinement in this object, which was coming from a historic Parisian gallery and estimated to be between 10 and 15 thousands euros.

I am fascinated to go back in time in search of head authors, traversing the history of photography since its inception, in the early decades of the XIX century. In fact, among the photo of this period you can find rare photographs that often take many years to acquire them, but that are fundamental for the purposes of architecture, mounting and enjoying of my personal "work of art".

The *post mortem* daguerreotype, sparkling of *Eros & Thanatos*, would have been the starting point that would have ideally marked the beginning of my aesthetic-philosophical research on the theme of Gender Identity!

For that reason I decided to fight at auction with the firm determination to get it, despite the head of photography at Sotheby's told me that two renowned museums intended to purchase it.

As always, in this great passion of mine, I found myself alone and without holds of any kind, except to be aware of being in front of an extraordinarily important piece for me; I wondered how much I would be ready to spend on getting that photograph.

The auction started and the adrenaline was very high; I was aware that I would hardly have been able to find such a perfect piece for the chronological start of my collection and the fear of losing it led me to set a rather high bid limit, if compared to the estimate of the photo.

When the daguerreotype was finally called, I was ready for battle and with great amazement, after some relaunches by the museums concerned, I won the photograph by offering a sum just a little above the maximum esteem. I instinctively made a gesture of euphoria.

Jonas Tebib later confides to me that it was one of the first times he saw buying a daguerreotype, a pioneer object in the history of photography, not from a merchant or a museum, but directly from a private collector.

Here lies the beauty and subjectivity of collecting, there are no universal parameters and there is no object that makes everyone happy; each piece has its history, destiny, buyer and moment.

The intersection of these elements makes the difference between an indelible purchase and a commercial one, which is lacking of emotional tension.



Jean-Baptiste Sabatièr-Blot, "Post Mortem portrait", ca. 1850, 20x15, cm, full plate daguerreotype mounted in the original frame, ©Collezione Ettore Molinaro.

Sanne Sannes

I know Roy Kahmann, Dutch gallery owner since 2017, when I met him at the Unseen fair, in Amsterdam.

A current of sympathy and affinity in tastes pushes me to deepen his work and his artists.

Surprisingly, by knowing my collection, he apostrophized me by saying that I had to own a work by such a Sanne Sannes, a young Dutch photographer who died prematurely in a car accident in the late 70s.

Gallerist's impetuosity and decision in proposing this artist sparked a strong curiosity in me, so much that I willingly let myself told by him the story of this "cursed" photographer, and admired his works on a splendid catalog just published by Kahmann with the patronage of the Rijksmuseum of Amsterdam.

Watching through the images and listening to his obsessive story towards the female universe, I perceived the power of his extremes in the dialectic relationship between Eros & Thanatos; I immediately realized that I was trapped and in the impossibility of not buying one of his photographs.

Particularly, a black and white portrait of a woman showing a poignant melancholy, completely "scratched" on the negative as if the face had been portrayed with a net in front, very similar to a cage, attracted me.

A vintage photograph from 1959, in a one-of-a-kind size, a unique piece that was perfectly in line with my aesthetic taste and my personal research.

Roy, as an excellent psychologist and consummate merchant, immediately reminded me that this was Sanne's most important work, reserved by the Estate of Sanne Sannes for the Rijksmuseum and with a very high cost, so he invited me to consider other photographs, equally beautiful and available.

What could happen in the head and heart of a collector of my kind when the perfect artwork is not immediately available? It happens, very simply, that the "Sanne delirium" begins: I wanted to possess that photograph at all costs.

The game went from the work of art to the negotiation: I played my best cards and, of course, not without a certain loss of lucidity, even in relation to the price that someone is willing to pay.

Psychology, in collecting, is of vital importance, both by the side of the collector and that of the intermediary or seller.

It is a game in which understanding the other and his moves allows you to bring home the result without too much damage, but it assumes that there is empathy between the two players. After all, both must really wanted to close the deal, and differently, the game stops immediately: here once again, in the negotiation of the work, instinct and future vision play a fundamental role.

When a gallery owner is holding a work that he considers important, he is the first who, unconsciously, does not want to sell it and this must be clear to collector.

It's not simply a question of price, other much more subtle variables come into play and this must be clear, otherwise no masterpiece will ever enter your collection.

Many owners of galleries that I met on my way are collectors and with them, the game often becomes more difficult, since "attachment" to the work of art takes a primary role.

Among the gallery owners I feel closest to, there are people such as James Hyman from London or Tom Gitterman from New York who were great collectors but who deeply metabolized that there is a certain conflict of interest between the gallery owner's soul and that of the collector.

They are gallerists who are able to take advantage of their experience and bring it, with a significant detachment from the artworks they sell, for the benefit of those who buy them, rejoicing that their favorite works end up in the hands of the people they respect.

By the way, let's go back to *Untitled*, Sanne Sannes's 1959 vintage photograph; the price was really high for the current recognition of the artist (I would say more than double what I would have hypothesized and hoped to spend) and scarcely negotiable.

It is on such occasions that the belly-mind balance comes into play, which represents one of the most complex but also the most adrenaline situations; it is a challenge with yourself from every point of view: you can accept it or give up and the decision is entirely in your hands, nobody can help you. You are facing with a precarious balance: the rational part is clear and tells you that the price is too high, but the instinct and the heart tell you that you must own it: you loved it at first sight, you have no doubts.

The gallery owner tells you to think about it calmly, and that's what you don't want to hear in your heart...

There is no calm within yourself because it could soon run away and be sold to someone else who is more forward-looking than you.

My luck is that most of the images I love are not easily marketable, as they reflect apparently "niche" themes and atmospheres.

However, I decided to take some time to reflect on this purchase and, since I am a rather impulsive person, I took the occasion to check my "cold" mood.

The result is that for days I kept thinking about this image and looking at the catalog, studying the figure of this photographer who reminded me, although with a different poetics and subjects, the work of the great Robert Mapplethorpe. In fact, these two photographers were both extremely classic, despite the power of their images, they were innovative, profound, capable of perfectly using the technique, although their imperfections, both "kamikaze" of life who were barely accepted by their contemporaries and died prematurely.

I remember that one night, while I stayed in mountain, I was aware that Sannes's photograph would have been an excellent purchase.

The day after I got rid of this worry definitively by writing one of my final bid to the gallerist, a proposal that with the subsequent consent of the Sanne Sannes Estate was accepted, according to them, also in consideration of the quality of my collection.



Sanne Sannes, "Untitled", 1959, 64x48, cm, vintage gelatin silver print, mounted on hardboard for exhibition at Arnhem Museum in 1966, Courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro, ©The Estate of Sanne Sannes.

Lisette Model

The purchase of Lisette Model's photograph *Woman with veil, San Francisco* represents another example of belly-mind balance.

I am in Milan at Mc2 Gallery at the opening of a collective exhibition of some young photographers they represent, and as often happens with Claudio Composti, after visiting the exhibition, we go in the gallery back room, a small and very intimate space where we can talk together out the lines.

Then, he pulls out a large folder and with the smile that distinguishes him in these cases, he opens it and shows me a great vintage photograph from 1949 of one of the best known and representative images of the teacher of Diane Arbus.

A dynamic shot of a very chic elderly lady sitted on a bench: she is fully dressed and wears a hat, veil and gloves, she is portrayed from an external point of view and shows a rapacious gaze, while she is quickly turns her head.

The rarity of this image also lies in the detailed description on the back of the photo, handwritten by Lisette, with also date and her signature: Lisette's calligraphy, written in blue ink with a fine tip, seems to have come from the hands of the portrayed elderly lady.

I do not make a turn at the sight of this image, conversely I feel an initial rejection towards this image, as if it did not belong to me in the least as a subject, I thank Claudio and firmly explain my mood and my disinterest in this image.

Anyway, he knows me very well, re-wraps the print with care, and we don't talk about it anymore. For almost a year we haven't talked about this image with the only exception of my visits to the gallery where, between a glass and another, I asked Claudio to review that photo, then he showed it to me again with great patience and satisfaction.

The image came from the Baudoin Lebon Gallery that represents, together with Keitelman Gallery, the Estate of Lisette Model and I also knew that this image, if it had not been sold, would have returned to France.

Also in this occasion, as it happened with Sanne Sannes, the price was very high, with the difference that in this case attraction for this photo had not been triggered at first sight and, therefore my anxiety to lose the image was lower.

As a collector I can say that events occur in your mind in a totally random way and this often determines the turning point in ambiguous and uncertain situations like this; the important thing is to know how to grasp them and somehow decode them to your advantage.

This photo began to work slowly in my mind, in its strength and diversity, if compared to all the female and "parafeminine" subjects that are the object of my inner drives: it was as if I was struggling to bring such an elderly female figure into my universe, even though in her strong personality.

I felt confused by this novelty, by the apparent non-identification with any part of myself and in the strange situation of not wanting this image, in short, I was in a dark field in which I was struggling to orient myself.

Nevertheless, I felt it was a great image, an extraordinary snap-shot, representative of a pride, elegance, dynamism, awareness of the subject, who was typical of the 50s in the USA.

The turning point came with my reinterpretation of the role of Diane Arbus as a champion in investigating the topic of "diversity". In fact, her characters were often on the margins of society,

always different, portrayed in their environment but never diminished, indeed Arbus elected them to icons, apparently at ease, with the paradox of the viewer who, conversely, felt uncomfortable because of the acceptance of the subjects in their freakness.

I was rationally wondering if Arbus represented a landmark in the history of photography, universally recognized and listed, why never her teacher Lisette Model, who dazzled Diane Arbus with her belief that the camera is a tool through which to explore both external and inner worlds, had to be outdone...

In fact, according to Lisette, photography must reveal something of its subject but also something of the photographer, and this belief struck the sensitivity of Arbus: Lisette has always portrayed unconventional beauties and bizarre shapes, sure that an ugly body was very charming and less boring to portray, if compared to a harmonious body.

It was just this artistic research aimed to explore the “introspection of the different”, typical of the work of Lisette Model and Arbus, that triggered in me the analogy and the projection with one of the cornerstones of my collecting, and therefore my inner investigation.

So, unlike most of my past purchases, empathy with the work developed from my mind and slowly spreaded, as if by osmosis, into my belly and unconsciously generated the relationship of mutual possession with the work and my need to make it mine.

After many checks on auction results of the same image, moreover useless since they were extremely discordant, depending on the auction and the specimen on sale, I made an offer and purchased it.

The photo entered the collection and with great curiosity I observed the peculiar “relationship” that was established with the other artworks and, particularly, the emotional impact that its daily enjoyment generates.

Purchasing Lisette Model's photo was an important point of break with my usual way of collecting, it was as if, after the initial phase of satisfaction and exhaustion of the deepest libidinal drives, started a new period of more “mediated” collecting maturity that is also linked to a conceptual recognition of the artwork, while always respecting my aesthetic taste.



Lisette Model, "Woman with veil, San Francisco", 1949, 50x39 cm, vintage gelatin silver print, Courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro, ©The Lisette Model Foundation Inc.

Pierre Molinier and Suh Se Ok

After years of absence, in 2018 I returned with curiosity to London to visit Frieze, the main London fair dedicated to contemporary art, with the firm intention of not acquiring anything.

This fair, is held the splendid setting of Regent's Park and is divided into two pavilions: Frieze Master and Frieze, which are not very far apart.

I decide to start with Frieze Master, that is the part of the fair where you can find works created by both historical artists and contemporary artists, even if the boundaries between these two categories are often very blurred.

The context that surrounds you is really stimulating, the booths are very large, the corridors are easily passable and a refined atmosphere leads you to enjoy the artworks carefully selected by gallerists from all over the world.

However the surprise is always lurking, in fact in that occasion I met a French gallerist I have known for some time, Christophe Gaillard who, together with the owner of the 1900-2000 Gallery, was engaged in a rediscovery of the surrealist artist, both painter and photographer, Pierre Molinier, whom I owned already a vintage photograph.

Pierre Molinier is a historical cornerstone of my thematic strand, his "self-portraits" in the form of photomontages and prints are the quintessence of the dark category, here considered as transvestitism and fetishism: through his work, Molinier sometimes reincarnates himself as a woman, on one hand dominatrix and diabolical on the other, into surrealistic scenarios full of cynicism and eroticism.

So I couldn't resist the narcissistic and inner drive to possess two other images of this extraordinary and pioneering artist.

The triptych *Pierre et Hanel. Comment je voudrais être*, coming from Molinier's daughter, intrigued me. It is given by a sequence of three images which, through the manipulation and collage of Pierre Molinier's selfportrayts and the photographs of the body of his model Hanel (the woman he was obsessed with), shows the progressive approach to neutral identity that the artist has explored during his entire career.

Le Chaman is the most symbolic photograph of Molinier, also used for the cover of his rarest book, it called me from the other wall of the booth and in that moment, in addition to emotion, the rarity of the image came into play.

When I accidentally come across a long-desired image, my rational part breaks down and the need for possession, as the fruit of identification, has the upper hand.

After a close negotiation on the price, I purchased both artworks, with a feeling of happiness and satisfaction, really forgetting my initial good saving intentions!

The next day I visited Frieze, in the other pavilion, where contemporary art reigns supreme; there I found great liveliness, in accordance with the growing interest in contemporary artworks that corresponds the new aesthetic tastes and the trends of the new markets.

The offer is very wide and it is impossible to find conducting threads, from an aesthetic point of view.

At Frieze the label with the name of the proposing gallery becomes more relevant, and the "reality" of the work becomes less important.

One point five (1,5 million) becomes the object of desire, and clouds of patrons often stop in front of very expensive works that actually mean nothing.

I enjoy observing all this, the questions I ask myself are many and I feel a little dated or, perhaps, a little snobbish in front of this unstoppable massification and globalization of aesthetic taste.

I stop in a booth of a new friend of mine, Rachel Lehmann, owner of a prestigious New York gallery with two branches in Hong Kong and Seoul and as if I were in an oasis I got lost in observing her proposals of oriental artists, whose works were very contemporary but distinguished by a rare refinement.

I was impressed by a 1999 painting from the *People series* made by the South Korean artist, Suh Se Ok (who today is almost ninety years old) with large brushstrokes of ink on large sheets of rice and mulberry paper, where he painted very stylized figures made with variable dashes and lines in width, thickness and black tones.

The result is very close to pure abstraction and looks like a quiet but targeted visual poetry, in line with Zen graphic tradition.

This painting enchanted me and I never got tired of observing it, I expressed to the gallerist my interest in deepening the biography of the artist and his work and so, I spent some time admiring his books, where I found a great continuity in the quality of his paintings.

I felt a strong desire to purchase this artwork whose price was high, also in consideration of the purchases made previously.

I wanted to reflect on it and, in agreement with the gallerist, we met up the next day.

I had no doubts about the desire to possess this painting, but I felt dazed by the idea of further burdening my budget, and I had to reflect on the identification mechanism underlying that desire, in order not to enter a quite emotional and compulsive spiral of purchasing.

The painting, thanks to its delicacy, cleanliness and abstraction, was at the opposite extreme of Pierre Molinier purchases I made the day before, and the question raised spontaneously: why was that so?

Quite simply my other polarity, the one more Eros had emerged forcefully into an identification projection with this image and artist's own spirit and essence.

The combined purchase of *People* by Suh Se Ok, together with Molinier's self-portraits, revealed one of the most positive aspects of my analytical journey through my art collection and made me aware about the existence of a dialogue between the opposite drives related to the topics of life and death. I became conscious of an *inner democracy* that is still developing in myself, allowing me to accept and not reject of these opposing polarities.

Once again, in spite of my instinctive part, the underlying psychic mechanism came to light fairly quickly, by adding new and surprising elements to my introspective journey through art.



*Pierre Molinier "Le Chaman", 1968, 17x12, cm, vintage gelatin silver print (photomontage),
Courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro, ©Comité Pierre Molinier.*



Pierre Molinier, "Pierre et Hanel. Comment je voudrais être ", 1969, approx. 25x50 cm, vintage gelatin silver print (photomontage), Courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro, ©Comité Pierre Molinier.



Suh Se Ok "People", 1999, cm 45,7x40,3, ink on rice and mulberry paper, Courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro, ©Suh Se Ok.

Claude Cahun and André Kertész

Among the various photography fairs in the world, I believe that Paris Photo represents the most important annual appointment for a collector of photography.

Both historical and contemporary photography blend in the magical setting of the Grand Palais: since the most important galleries in the world participate the fair, here you can find the highest level photographs, in terms of quality of the pieces and offer.

Our time is marked by “barbarization of art” (similar to what happened in the Middle Ages), which is caused by artistic populism, featured by high superficiality and low competence, since the virtualization of art and new markets, have attracted rich people looking for decoration and *status*, fascinated only by the brand of the galleries or by the bombastic names of the most popular artists. Consequently it has often occurred the separation of the price of an artwork with its real value, opening the way to the total confusion in the art market.

Nevertheless, in Paris Photo (a real photography paradise) you can enjoy, at least in the first days of the fair, a different atmosphere.

The main novelty of the 2018 edition concerned a special photograph that would be auctioned by Sotheby's on the 9th of November: the photo of Claude Cahun “Autoportrait au chat”, taken around 1927, which represented the dream of many years.

For Claude Cahun, photography translates dreams and desires, while the artist's body becomes a prosthesis of her research and a “finished” witness of a schizophrenic journey into someone else's role².

Claude Cahun (stage name of Lucy Schwob) represents a fundamental pillar for my photographic collection as regards the topic of personal and sexual identity, especially because she was a pioneer who worked on this theme in the first decades of the XX century, very closely with important exponents of the surrealist movement. Her work has been also a source of inspiration for artists such as Pierre Molinier, Hans Bellmer, Cindy Sherman and many others.

A small problem for the collectors is that there are no many photos of Cahun out there: there is no gallery representing her and the only reference is the silent Jersey Heritage Trust, which houses a wide number of Claude's photographs.

Based on the market research, it seems that a photograph of her comes out every three years or so, and is then sold in more or less important auctions at very variable amounts. Particularly, Cahun's photos most interesting for collectors are those of her “surrealist self-portraits”, which are all in small size.

Anyway, let's talk about how arose my desire to own a such iconic photograph of this peculiar and eccentric artist.

I faced the pre-auction days with great strictness and emotion; I asked James Hyman (owner of the namesake Londoner gallery) to check the image and his response was irrefutable: the image is beautiful and very rare, but most likely it would have been contended by collectors and dealers and therefore, we should have expected a strong growth in the estimate, already stood between 15-20 thousands euros.

² Cfr., Fabiola Naldi.

At the preview of the auction at Sotheby's, to my amazement, the image was the first photograph shown at the entrance to the room, hanging in the left corner and I intercepted it immediately.

I carefully examined the framed image and focused on the strength of the photo, I felt as if a bullet had pierced the viewer, even from unimaginable distances: that little card radiated a magnetic, demonic, surreal and magical power.

It was clear that I was possessed by this image (we will find out later the confirmation of my perception) and it was equally evident that I would fight to the best of my ability to purchase this pearl.

Two days passed before the auction and in the meantime I enjoyed Paris Photo, while constantly thinking about Cahun magical photo.

Meanwhile, another episode occurred at James's booth which testified the very rare elective affinity which stands between the collector and the gallerist.

I was talking to him and his lovely wife, Claire, about the fair when, with his ironic smile he asked me if I like the work of André Kertész and, very intrigued, I answered him affirmatively.

He suddenly got up and went into the tiny closet of his booth and brought out a 1933, *Distortion*: an exhibition print (significantly larger than other existing copies), a unique piece mounted on a hardboard and framed like an object. It was exhibited at the Biennale di Venezia in 1963, and in the same year it was shown at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in Paris.

I was amazed at the sight of this one-of-a-kind image and he explained calmly and in detail both the magic of this photo from an aesthetic point of view, and its incredible exhibition history, so we started to discuss it.

In occasions like that, which were several repeated with James, a collector of my kind is put on the corner, since the focus is not on the purchasing of an artwork, but on the transmission of the love felt towards an extraordinary image from one human being to another.

From my point of view, this is the sublimation of the collecting: there are no psychological filters in this process because only the truth and reality of the artwork emerge, in spite of the distorted information due to the art market.

This is the most beautiful and healthiest phase, and should always constitute the basis of any purchase of works of art, as is the relationship between gallerists and collectors.

However, it often happens that it prevails the information related to the commercial aspects of the artwork and their speculative potential, so that relational attention is limited in determining whether the work is a good deal or not.

When I was conveyed the love for Kertész's *Distortion*, something happened to me that I want to highlight, in order to clearly explain the quality of the relationship that binds me to James.

When he offered me the work of Kertész, with my thoughts I was at the Sotheby's auction (which would be held the next day) and the uncertainty of the potential increase of the esteem of Cahun's photograph, which I longed so much. So I would have felt an unpleasant weakness, in case I had to commit to purchase another financially demanding artwork.

Obviously I didn't talk about it with James, but the fact that I would have made the purchase of Kertész's masterpiece dependent on the result of the auction disturbed me a lot.

The thing that upset me was the fact that I was thinking of that overtime artwork as a second choice, but suddenly my trusted gallerist interrupted my thoughts by saying: "It is clear that first you will want to see how the purchase of Cahun will go".

It was exactly what I was reflecting on, but that sincere sentence aimed at not making me upset, showed me a dose of sensitivity and respect for my figure that gave me the answer I was looking for. That was the emotional trace of the purchase of Kertész's masterpiece.

I firmly replied that I wanted to buy it and immediately, regardless of what would have happened with Claude Cahun's photograph, because that work was extraordinary, also for my relationship with James, whose typical British aplomb gave me the feeling that he understood and appreciated my words.

Finally, the day of the Sotheby's auction came.

I was very nervous even if I tried to convey a great serenity to my daughter (even if she didn't believe it), we arrived in due time in Rue Faubourg Saint Honorè and then asked Vanessa to bid on the photo on my behalf.

It was the first time for her, but she was curious and interested in that image and willingly accepted; so she was given scoop no. 181 and we both appreciate that number.

About 40 daguerreotypes and another dozen photos passed before arriving at lot 48, ours.

Behind her sat a French merchant who won several daguerreotypes with a determined attitude, and I had the bad feeling that he would have tried to buy my photo too.

So, he aroused my determination and in a low voice I confided to Vanessa my desire to fight to prevent the photo from ending up in his hands...

As if by magic, after beating the last daguerreotype, the Frenchman went away.

Lot no. 48 arrived and its image was projected onto a large screen after the beater announced that, being the image too small, the real photograph would not have been shown. When I saw it appear on the screen I had the feeling that no one would purchase that image.

The auction started: it was called with the least esteem, phones were silent, there were no beater in the room and the image was still on the screen.

It was a surreal situation: I had managed to purchase one of the masterpieces in the history of photography relating to the theme of gender identity, to the minimum estimate and without other competitors in the world.

It was there that the mysteriousness of this purchase happened and now, I would like to explain it from my personal point of view.

This photograph had never been seen before Sotheby's auction, there is no trace of it neither on the Internet, nor on books dedicated to Claude Cahun, it has never been exhibited, not even at the National Portrait Gallery in London, which also organized a retrospective exhibition dedicated to her together with Gillian Wearing in 2017.

Besides, the photograph has an exceptional provenance, the Foujita-Desnos collection that seems to have come directly as a gift from Cahun to Desnos, a surrealist poet, close friend of her and perhaps more, and to Foujita, an important painter and member of the well-known *Ecole de Paris*. It was proposed with an esteem of 15000-20000 euros, a very low amount if compared to those of her other important self-portraits

Now, there are two possible alternatives: the photo, for some unknown reason has not reached the right target of collectors, which is very unlikely, because auction houses use very effective communication means or, as I prefer to believe, is that this extraordinary image of Cahun, so rare, powerful and also so uncanny, had to enter my collection.

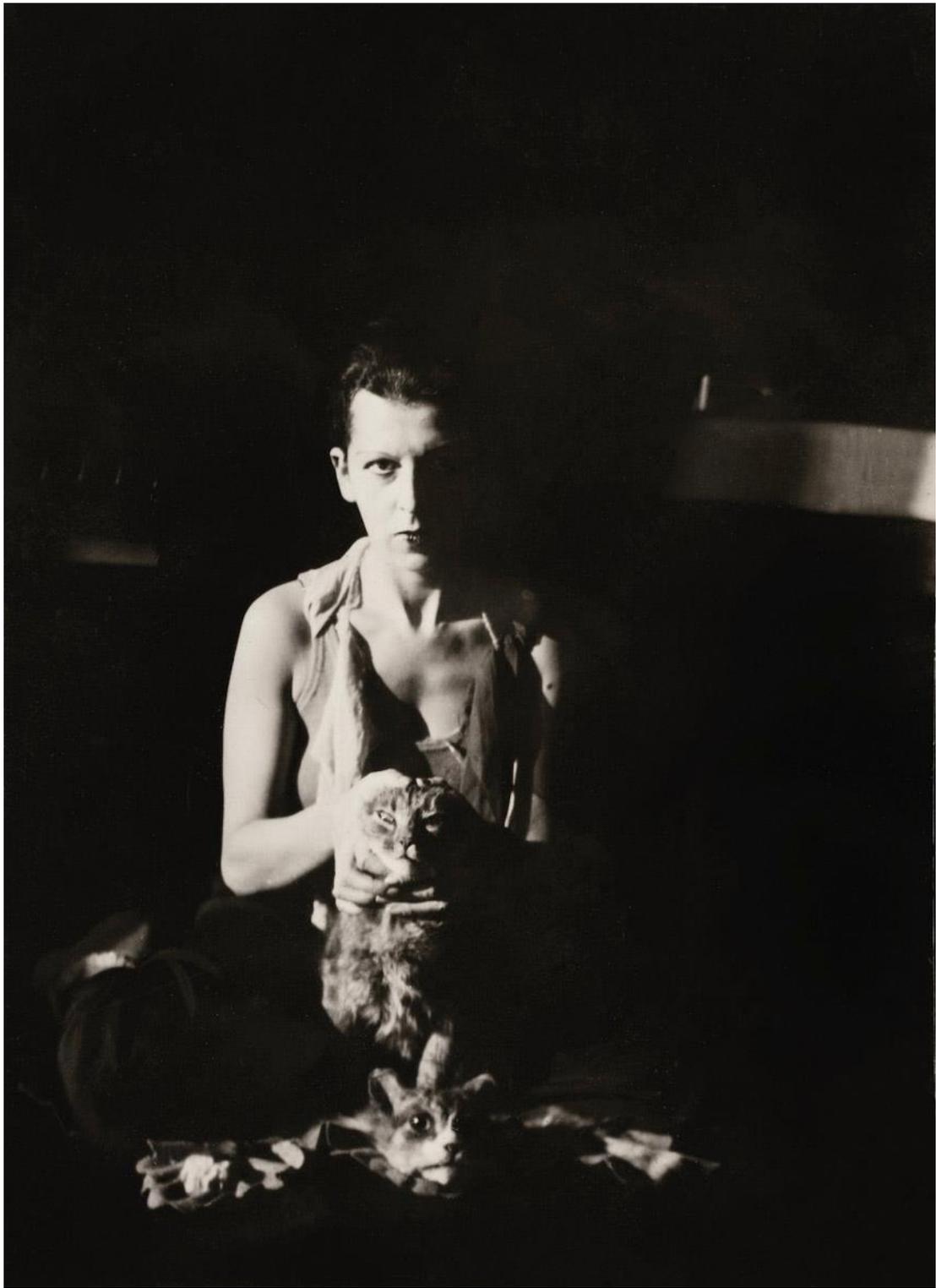
The fortuities that revolve around this purchase give credit to this interpretation. In fact, for Claude Cahun the number 8 was a very significant number: the 8th of December is the day on which her

death occurred, when she was 60 years old; moreover on the 8th of May 1945 she was freed, together with her life partner Marcel Moore (stage name of Suzanne Malherbe), from the prison of Saint Hèlier.

However, the coincidences are not finished: 181 is the number of the scoop with which Vanessa has beaten the work at Sotheby's and it was as if Cahun was symbolically between us that day, furthermore, the 8th of December is my birthday and when I purchased this image I was 60 years old, it's all too strange!

I wanted to tell this very personal episode to reinforce the thesis that this self-portrait of Claude Cahun kneeling on the ground with her cat and showing with a demonic aspect, had to become part of me.

I believe that the fact that no other person (neither at the phone nor in the auction room) has been “accepted” by this image as a competitor in its purchase, despite its very low price, has a meaning that goes beyond the rules of the market. Rather, it is as if this image had “self-refused” in marketing itself, creating the conditions for an exclusive one-to-one relationship.



Claude Cahun, "Autoportrait au chat", 1927 ca., cm 11x8, vintage gelatin silver print, Courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro, ©Jersey Heritage.



André Kertész, "Distortion # 34", 1933, cm 41x60, vintage gelatin silver print, mounted on hardboard for the exhibition at Biennale di Venezia and in Paris in 1963, Courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro, ©The Estate of André Kertész.

These personal considerations reported in this essay aims to constitute a diagnosis of contemporary consciousness in the era of mirrors, (we should think of the internet as the great mirror of the world), and point out that the most genuine and coherent creative gesture does not only consist in making images, but in recreating them by assigning an individual meaning to those existing and gathered in a collection, awakening them from their numbness.

In this way, artistry, in the post-photography era, no longer resides only in the physical act of producing images, but in the ascription of the values and personal identifications that they can welcome, allowing the collector to “live in them”.

Ettore Molinaro, 2018