

Parodic attitudes in performative photography

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ABSTRACT: As a medium and tool that attributes its power of meaning in the art world, photography has been appealing to the narrative function since the historical era of its emergence as a means of communication. Identified today by the phrases of performative or staged photography, the practice of the scene constructed and narrated in front of the camera frequently uses parodic attitudinal approaches encompassing different strategies of expression and touching on a wide variety of subjects. The series of examples access segments of life found in intimate space, in socio-political, post-colonial analysis, but also in the criticism of the environment or of historical aspects of art.

KEYWORDS: Performative photography; staging, parody; narrative; visual communication; contemporary photography;

Introduction

Viewed in a generalized way, parody is understood as a performative work that has the function of imitating another work with the aim of ridiculing and ironizing it. Coming from the Greek “para-odos” (“counter-song” or “alongside”) – in which the linguistic particle “para” has the meaning of both “alongside” and “against” – parody is seen as one of the major forms of self-reflexivity of moderns, being understood as a form of inter-artistic discourse (Hutcheon, 1982). As art forms have become increasingly suspicious of external criticism, they have been designed to incorporate critical commentary into their own structures, in a kind of self-legitimizing short-circuiting of normal critical dialogue, to the point of integrating their own critical self-commentary (for example, the self-critical

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distancing in Rene Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*). The ironic distance of modern parody also stems from the loss of humanist confidence in the continuity and stability of culture, which ensured the sharing of codes necessary for understanding doubly coded quotations, such as, for example, symbolic images from the Renaissance or Baroque. In this context of modern interrogation of the nature of self-referentiality and legitimacy, the contemporary interest in parody, the genre that has been described as both a symptom and an instrument of the modernist episteme, also appears.

Parody as a visual artistic practice

As a working technique, parody refuses the romantic postulate of the author and regards the work of art as a text, or rather inter-text, presupposing the reading of the image and the understanding of references to meanings belonging to other works or cultural signifiers, such as, for example, advertising messages. Among these working techniques we can talk about quotation, collage, pastiche and appropriation. Parody can be said to have at least two authorial voices – that of the author of the work and that of the appropriated one – and, implicitly, at least two overlapping meanings (Hutcheon, 1982). In this way, parody parasitizes other forms of art, being similar to deconstruction. The dominant definition would be that parody is a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding, which would introduce difference into the process of similarity, repeating an image, a code towards which both a critical distance and a tendency for imitative repetition and differentiation can occur. In turn, the operational definition claims that “parody would be a structural modeling process of revisiting, playful resuming, inversion and trans-contextualization, respectively of overcoming the initial context of signification of previous works of art as well as of “cultural recycling” (Hutcheon, 1982).

Thus, instead of appropriate works of art, the parodic reference can include cultural conventions, visual and behavioral clichés, cultural or social codes, etc. For example, in his video work *Runoff* (1973), in which Vito Acconci rubs his naked, unpainted body against a wall, the artist directly refers to Yves Klein's performances in *Anthropometries* and *Monotonous Symphony* and at the same time parodies the conventions of performance in relation to painting (the use of the body as a support).

Among the functions of parody, one can list the critical function, not necessarily of the work used as a parodic support, the function of recoding, through the playful use of reading conventions (of an image, of a cultural code, etc.) and the function of “criticism of ideology”; for example, on the one hand it functions as a liberator against the “false consciousness” produced by already familiar cultural codes, especially by their social consumption, destabilizing their meanings, and on the other hand, it brings meaning to the “surface”, demonstrating that, at least in postmodernity, the surface (of a structure or image) is the very meaning of the moment.

Initially, the category of parody would represent a work with a humorous or

satirical character, consisting of a caricatured imitation of another work, by resuming in a comic manner the themes, motifs and specific artistic means. It would also designate, in addition to a parodistic imitation, an unsuccessful imitation. Traditionally finding its filiation in the comic, the aesthetic category of parody is, at least from the point of view of contemporary artistic practice, much more complex. Its meanings refer to more than an imitation of a work or its manner. A multitude of interpretative, conjunctural, informational considerations compose the diversity of meanings through which parody can be understood today.

Thus, deviations occur, they interact with other categories considered in the comic sphere: burlesque, grotesque, ridiculous, cynicism, irony, derision, caricature, idiocy. If burlesque refers to that extravagant, grotesque and often vulgar comic, being associated with an active, bodily attitude, idiocy, grotesque and ridiculous are associated with passive states of observation. Grotesque includes extreme poses, deliberately disproportionate contrasts, frightening, monstrous, violent, physical and moral ugliness; ridiculous arouses hilarity, mockery, the ridiculous; cynicism defies moral norms and rules of social coexistence, openly and without shame supporting such an attitude.

Unlike burlesque, parody does not necessarily imply a ridiculous component. Parody also differs from the aesthetic category of satirical, as a subcategory of the comic, which is moral and social in its objects and ameliorative in its intentions. In Hutcheon's opinion, parody can be serious, redefining it in this context as repetition with critical distance. Hutcheon treats irony and parody as similar, since they both presuppose the coexistence of at least two meanings on the surface of the text (cultural discourse). Unlike another close genre, pastiche, parody does not simply imitate, but emphasizes the difference in repetition. It transforms and reinterprets the quoted text or image. Compared to the simple process of quoting, parody re-codes the borrowed quotation. Regarding the distinction between parody and irony, this would consist in the fact that in a parody, irony functions as a signal of difference from the borrowed text, code, work or image, and from its meanings (Hutcheon, 1982). In turn, defining parody from a semiotic perspective, Margaret Rose differentiates parody and satire through the referent: while parody uses a pre-determined language or code, satire re-codifies or re-interprets reality, uncoded (Rose, 1979).

The tendency to dissolve art into life, declared with virulence by the Dadaists, supports the annexation of banal, brutal, unadorned, anti-aesthetic reality through various artistic attitudes, including parody. Analyzing art as a language that encompasses form and content, a distinction could be made between the work of art and the aesthetic object if one were to take into account the intentional attitude of the artist, distinct from the aesthetic experience of the receiver.

The main characteristic of parody is the appeal to collective memory. Therefore, the main working method is comparative work, which is carried out between the targeted

element of collective memory and the cultural product that makes creative reference to the former. Other procedures for developing parody would be allusion, deviance, recontextualization, speculation, combination, formal analogy, tendentious copying, etc. Parodying cultural, social, political space and time becomes an emphasized practice in the art of parody. Parodic is the effect of distancing oneself from clichés, establishing difference, of slipping away from cliché or given. The goal of parody is not a better world, but a world different from the one usually proposed, and thus, protected by ideologies, by the passive conformism of the receptors and by paralyzing routine.

The artistic production of this end of the millennium has signaled a sustained interference with consumer and advertising production. Punctuated almost a century ago by the incipient forms of Duchampian institutional declassification and continued by the neorealists, through crude formulas that suggested a new aesthetic of the everyday, contemporary art is now revealing itself in directions that use the skeleton and even the media procedures of the audiovisual and the Internet.

If artists borrow formally, and often critically, the advertising language, so too, the modalities of artistic construction are taken over as patterns by advertising production. Situated somewhere on the border with design, fashion photographs transcend a so-called subcultural world through images that propose decodings (interpretations) on a multitude of levels of reception. These multiple decodings are primarily based on the combined use of several technical and conceptual elaboration procedures, two of which are the subject of the present analysis: parody and performativity.

Ziva Ben Porat defines parody as "an alleged representation, often comic, of a text or other artistic object – that is, a representation of the modeled reality, which is itself already a representation of the original 'reality'. Parodic representations expose the conventions of the model and expose its devices by the coexistence of two codes within the same message" (Ben Porat, 1979). Likewise, Ziva Ben Porat defines satire as "a critical representation, always comic and often caricatured, of non-modeled reality, that is, of real objects (their reality may be mythical or hypothetical), which the receiver reconstructs as referents of the message. The original reality satirized may include mores, attitudes, types, social structures, prejudices, etc." (Ben Porat, 1979).

From the perspective of cultural criticism, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh notes that parody has a double effect on cultural conventions and the idea of tradition, because on the one hand, it preserves a convention, and on the other hand, it transgresses the conventions of a genre by recoding it (Buchloh, 1982). In the first case, Buchloh notes, for example, that Picabia's drawings, although they parody the author and the aesthetic function of the drawing, replacing them with the style of engineering plans and diagrams, in fact highlight the notion of the author, replacing one aesthetic with another, an austere one (Buchloh, 1982). In the second case, Buchloh sees Polke's paintings as combinations of ironic appropriations of "low" cultural forms (as in the case of pop art) and cultural

quotations from "high art". The result of this essentially parodic combination is a "reification of codes and a subversive recoding" (Buchloh, 1982, p. 33). In this context, Buchloh analyzes parody in relation to appropriation, concluding that the effects of parody, which began as a self-reflexive attitude, are ultimately the dissolution of modern individualism, along with the critique of the idea of "ownership" of a cultural asset.

Self-reflexive parodic forms

Since 1920, recorded on film by his good friend Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp duplicates himself by photographically interpreting the poses of a fictional character, invented by himself, *Rose Sélavy* (fig. 1). The representation does not aim to be a simple staging of a transvestite, the artist declaring that the figure in question could also be a man as long as there was a correspondence between it and the text. Duchamp alias Rose Sélavy resorts to a pun to construct a title with multiple meanings. The character's name decoded as Eros, c'est la vie, translated Sex, this is life, represents an aphorism that synthesizes the author's concept of the artistic act. In Duchamp's imagination, the erotic implies the need to escape the taste of the lock created by the static tradition. Through the iconic image of Rose Sélavy he tries to find a form that preserves chance. In this association with art, Duchamp believes that erotic formulation implies the preservation of taste, while sex itself is different because it is not repetitive. Thought becomes erotic when it manifests itself as a thought in constant formation. In fact, referring to the short period in which he painted, he states in an interview taken from the Paris-Normandie newspaper on April 12, 1967: "Thanks to repetition you can do 3-4 exceptional things, but anything else is repetition. There is nothing more boring than repetition" (Castronuovo, 2003). The playful aspect is defining for all of Duchamp's work. "I have great respect for humor – he declares – it is a kind of protection that allows you to go through all the mirrors" (Viau, 2002). The construction of this parodic alter ego, the transformation of Duchamp into Rose Sélavy, triggers a game full of interpretation, a joy of living and always creating something new, but it also represents a categorical act that denounces the majority of artistic production as outdated and useless (Teodorescu, 2024).

The manifest discourses specific to the artistic avant-garde parody, following the evolutionary path in the field of ideas, the theoretical expositions of the trends that precede them. In his work *I Box*, from 1962, Robert Morris presents the subjective "I" of the production of the work of art as a body-object to be viewed (fig. 2). From a painting, a door in the shape of the letter I opens, making way for the view of a photograph depicting the naked, standing artist. By revealing the naked male body, re-presented through the mechanical process of photography, Morris reverses the tradition of Abstract Expressionist painting in which the canvas is the place of inscription of the artistic "I" revealed this time through the production of the sign (Morris, 1995). As in most modern

trends of this period, this time too, attention is directed towards the annulment of the dominant mode of expression, which promoted the transposition of the author's artistic identity through gesturalism. Morris does not only attack the pictorial plastic form, but intervenes at the level of the choice of medium, a hybrid installation construction having in the three-dimensional development of the sculpture, in the visual photographic transcription and in the performative approach of one's own body, the arguments of a solid artistic communication method.

The critical image of the star

The image promoted as a poster is also quite used, in different versions, in the criticism of contemporary society. Thus, in one of his four works in the *Art Magazine Ads* series, the one for the magazine *Artforum* through the appropriation of social and aesthetic conventions, Jeff Koons poses in front of children as a teacher, behind whom are written several phrases that parody the status of didactic assumptions: "exploits the masses", "banality is savior", thus confronting a certain moral crisis (fig. 3). The role brings the character into the position of a character found in Hollywood typologies, a pleasant, friendly figure, adored by the public, paradoxically extracted from the preferred interpretation of the American politician. Koons is aware of the power of advertising, his experience in his youth as a broker on Wall Street being decisive. His preoccupation with elements from popular culture qualifies him in this situation for the image of an art star, the visual emphasis having the role of both an affirmation of conceptions towards the cultural world and an ostentatious self-critical posture. Years before the name Koons became known, he hired an image consultant and paid for his own advertisements in international art magazines (Speetjens, 2009). The author understands that through his media intervention he short-circuits or calls into question the power relations of the participants within artistic institutions: artist, gallerist, critic, curator.

The author's intention does not always correspond to that of the photographed subject. In the late 1980s, *Vanity Fair* sent Helmut Newton to photograph Salvador Dali in his museum in Figueres. The dying painter was dressed in a silver satin robe and wore the decoration that the King of Spain had awarded him. According to Newton, Dali, who knew that the photographer wanted to depict him in daylight, made him wait for two days at the hotel before calling him on the third day, when the weather forecast announced severe storms. As soon as the sky darkened, Dali said: "I am ready for Newton, who has come because he knows that I am dying." Not having enough light, Newton had to use a 500-watt projector for this last historic photograph (fig. 4). Faced with imminent death, Dali has the power to parody himself by accepting to play the role of the eccentric to whom the world was accustomed. His aristocratic posture wrapped in glittering satin and outlined against the sumptuous setting, his twisted mustache, cannot save appearances, being exposed by the breathing apparatus hose (Wernik, 1986).

A completely different orchestration is found in another photograph, from 1999 by the same author, which depicts Vanessa del Rio in Miami, Florida (fig. 5). The woman in the image is known as the first black actress to reach star status in the adult film industry and more recently for her uninhibited biography, *Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior*, 2007, which investigates situations related to race and social class in relation to the context of violence and the sex trade. Vanessa occupies the center of the frame wearing a negligee, which rather reveals provocative underwear and generous cleavage, crossed by long strings of pearls accessorized with a giant cross. Her posture with one hand on her hip and the other resting on the handle of the vacuum cleaner evokes the domineering attitude of the mistress of her own apartment. Helmut Newton seems, at first glance, to be taking a common and quick photo due to the lighting directly coming from the camera flash. A closer look reveals that the author has parodically completed the scenography. The room populated with ceramic dolls dressed in puffy dresses, the furniture and carpet with leopard prints, the naive painting on the wall accompanied at the top by lace curtains, the portraits extracted from genre magazines, but especially the two stuffed flamingos build the true atmosphere of a kitsch ensemble. Against this context, Newton places in the foreground an album about interior design in New York. Moreover, he increases the interpretative level by introducing in close proximity the popular volumes entitled *Art of the 20th Century*, edited by Ingo F. Walther in 1998 (Teodorescu, 2024).

Parodic artistic expressions in advertising practice

The 1980s, through the work of several artists, established that staged photography that involves, in addition to the construction of environments related to the action, the subsequent processing of the image. For Erwin Olaf, the digital reconditioning in the guise of fashion photographs of the image of historical figures of royal blood, who died in tragic circumstances or were involved in notorious crimes, leads in the *Royal Blood* series (1997) to a performative-symbolic representation of historical memory (Olaf, 2019). The purity of the white space in which they make their ghostly photographic appearance, accompanied by the immaculate white of their garments, contrasts both chromatically and interpretively with the presence of blood, a sign of both royalty and eternal power as well as of their mortal condition. The characters of this series are immersed in a “bath of light”, which doubles the supra-mundane effect of the modeling photo with the unreal one of the space of historical memory. For example, Lady Diana looks at the lens both seductively and authoritatively, having the logo of the Mercedes in which she was at the time of the fatal accident stuck in her arm (fig. 6), Marie Antoinette appears decapitated, Julius Caesar naturally exposes, in a withdrawn attitude, the dagger stuck in his back, and Jackie Onassis presents herself seductively again, stained with the cerebral remains of her former husband, the President of the United States, J.F. Kennedy (Teodorescu, 2023).

The connection with the world of advertising makes Jim Fiscus approach his themes from a relaxed-ironic posture. He finds certain locations with characters that narrate a history specific to that space. In an Italian butcher shop we meet, alongside the phlegmatic workers, armed with cleavers, cattle carcasses, and Jamie Oliver, a well-known figure in the culinary world, hanging with his head down, a sign that the action takes place in a story with Cosa Nostra from the 40s-50s (*The Unfortunate Moment of Misunderstanding*, 2009). The attitude of the characters, however, in a macabre posture, actually parodies their specificity; a tricolor emblem that would refer to their Italian origin is stuck to the backside of a cattle hanging from the ceiling (fig. 7). In another photograph, thematically related to the one previously discussed, a typical image from the seventies is reconstructed, in which, in a restaurant, we find a wiretapping and listening post installed by the FBI services, Diner, 2005. The image is populated by wiretapping agents who are positioned between routine behaviors (smoking, eating, drinking coffee) and their professional activity. Fiscus reveals in a parodic way a parallel, invisible world, built for surveillance (fig. 8).

For David LaChapelle, the forms of expression of fashion photography combine humor, sex, and social criticism with special emotions and strong colors. Symbols, scenes, and characters are taken from the contemporary world of commercial culture, art history, and religion and are mounted in frames that restart the perception of reality and give them completely new meanings. In several of his fashion "reportages," he visually describes how the idyllic petit bourgeois existence in a residential area is broken by giant cans of Coca Cola (*I Buy Big Car For Shopping*, 2002), confronted with the appearance of a gigantic crustacean invading a suburban swimming pool (*Crustacean Invasion*, 2001), or captures the pose of an enormous burger falling from the sky and crushing a model (*Death by Hamburger*, 2001, fig. 9). Behind the tumultuous, bright and cheerful surface of the images lies the desire to criticize the norms of society and culture regarding the ideal of beauty, sexuality and consumption. Through the female figures present in the images, charged with the symbolism of the parameters that identify perfection, in relation to the oversized objects cut from pop culture, LaChapelle parodically discusses the aspects of society located between the American way of life and the identity of American art paradoxically built on these principles of consumption. Although usually the criticism is striking in its simple clarity, sometimes the apparently spontaneous formulations of the captured actions reach a deliberate ambiguity that comes as if from the pleasure of the game (Allsop, 2010).

The social space between reality and fiction

The American photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard created in 1970 a series of photographs entitled *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* in which he captured and edited various scenes from the life of the fictional character Lucybelle Crater in the style

of family photo albums (fig. 10). Meatyard's wife, Madelyn, played the role of Lucybelle, called in the series "the 21-year-old secretary, Crater's 46-year-old wife", being later replaced by other people, until the last photograph in which Lucybelle is played by the photographer himself (Cotton, 2004, pp. 18-19). In terms of poses, clothing and chosen locations, the construction of the images varies very little from the family snapshots, their routine being distorted only by the strange masks worn by the characters, which show their faces distorted and aged. However, Meatyard's suite of images also captures the relationship with his neighborhood neighbors in a profound early portrait of suburban America. The erasure of the face becomes a kind of democratizing strategy, perhaps superimposed on that ambition of postwar America to create a suburban world of equal citizens, equal opportunities, and identical homes filled with similar consumer goods. However, the foundation of such a vision finds its correspondence in the totalitarian regime, simultaneously developing in the Soviet Union, where individual rights did not matter, and state-produced goods - identical, shabby, and scarce - were the only ones available. In a strange way, this Cold War drama plays out in every tiny frame. Meatyard's images are both sympathetic and provocative, and it is this tension that makes them so interesting and enduring.

Life on the busy streets of New York, his adopted city, is the subject of the Danish artist Peter Funch's series *Babel Tales* (2006). Initially, the viewer tends to perceive documentary photographs, but as visual clues appear in each image, such as the coincidental relationships between characters, it is obvious that he is witnessing the visualization of fictional scenes. The author notices the stereotypes of the inhabitants of the American metropolis and places them in the same frame by resorting to digital compositing, after a selection of between 1000 and 10000 images for each thematic situation (fig. 11). The series includes around 40 works in which we notice a different repetitive action each time: people yawning, running, taking pictures, smoking, etc. Attacking the premises of documentary photography, Funch parodically interrogates the presence of the "Decisive Moment" in an alternative time in which coincidences are perhaps too symbolic to be true (McClelland, 2011).

Moriko Mori constructs a post-media, artificial universe, a fabulous Oceanorium in which she finds herself in the form of a sequined mermaid, all of which are printed on a giant photographic wall support (Goldberg, 1999). Mariko Mori's large-scale photographs and video installations present scenes of radical unconventionality that meditate on the abundance of artifice in contemporary culture and extract elements of Eastern spiritual thought and art to express confidence in the life of the new millennium. Her works reflect the combination of influences from Eastern and Western cultures. Using computer image processing techniques, she places no line of demarcation in the fantastic scenes, transforming herself into a synthetic being. The same computer technology that Mori uses to make her techno-mermaid appear and reappear in *Empty Dream* (1995) changes

her into an oversized pop star doll in *Birth of a Star* (1995). This photograph is presented in a light box (a favorite format of commercial advertising) and with a special, three-dimensional effect that gives it a unique luminous quality. The work is accompanied by a pop song composed and performed by the artist, which emphasizes the experience of this captivating unreal figure. In the photographs *Play with Me* (fig. 12) and *Tea Ceremony*, both taken in 1994, Mori transforms into an android interface intended to make the connection between technology and reality or between technology and the traditional Japanese world. The robot parodically interpreted by the artist arouses compassion, the feelings conveyed being associated with those of alienated people, who live their drama of loneliness in an advanced but emotionally hermetic society (Teodorescu, 2024).

Provocative, as in most of his projects, Oleg Kulik presents himself in the series of images *Nouveau Paradis* (2001) together with his partner in a "Darwinian" spirit by reflecting in a window, behind which are stuffed wild animals. The narrative of the resulting photographic series, superimposing explicit sexual acts on images of an artificial habitat of the animal kingdom, cynically questions the naturalistic interpretation of human life and evolution (fig. 13). New Paradise is a project in which Kulik tries to restore a hypostasis of the lost paradise, of the coexistence of man with the natural world from ancient times, but which is possible only when we are absent. Either man or nature is about to immediately sacrifice its reality, in order to make this combination possible. The stuffed animals acquire the illusion of life. The viewer's eyes do not notice the painted backgrounds, the seams, the supports that suspend the birds, the predators frozen in their jumps, the antelopes' runs. What is interesting is the way in which the illusion is instead constructed that the reflections of living people on the glass, like ghostly semi-transparent apparitions, hallucinations appearing in someone's eyes or like visitors from nowhere, trying to return to the natural world they left, but who still remain disembodied shadows, barely visible. If man wants to bring nature back to life, Kulik seems to signal, then he must agree that he must remain nothing more than a visiting ghost so as not to confuse the "indifferent nature", which never needed him, with his living presence. But there is also a different approach to the subject promoted through a variety of such ostentatious sexual representations. From the perspective of the author's aggressive artistic practice, inclined towards the recovery of the "Soviet individual", deprived today of the levers of power of the system, we cannot help but imagine an anarchist scenario in which reconstruction should reset the human condition to the zero moment of cohabitation with nature (Diaconov, 2009).

Political, postcolonial and cultural aspects

The Czech photographer Jan Saudek uses a form opposite to fashion imagery. Shot in black and white or sepia, his images are later colored pictorially, following the old retouching process, painting constituting, besides, along with the format and appearance

of old postcards, a primary source of his cultural imagery. His models, coming from the immediate, banal world, complete the naturalness of a fascinating and fruitful creation in scenographies that often formally borrow the decor, costumes or postures from the genre scenes of 17th-century Flemish painting. In the baroque universe of his studio, the Czech artist releases the obsessions of carnality and fatalism. Intelligence, humor, subtlety, passion and sincerity relieve the tension in which obesity, immodesty, impudence make their way into his subjects. Saudek undresses his models to reveal the plasticity of their defects and brings them into poses that often border on the vulgar. The contrast between the excessive flesh of the woman and the dry corporeality of the male figures proposed for his couples symbolically denotes that the vitality and energy of the man is drained and rechanneled by the needs of the woman. The duplicity of this relationship of desired possession and involuntary dependence of the man on the woman, exercised at the level of sexuality, is accentuated by interventions within the body representation. By emphasizing and manually retouching the veins covering the nudes as symbolic channels of circulation of the vital flow and mediators of energy consumption, the author doubles the perception of an apparent baroque eroticism, which defies conventional representations and fantasies, with the discreet symbolism of a psychoanalytic commentary on the relations between the sexes (Teodorescu, 2024). In the case of the work *Holy Russia* (1996-2000), the power relationship acquires political valences, complicating the levels of reception of the staged situation. The woman embodied in the title of the work does not directly refer to a spiritual presence, but suggests an idealization of the dominance of a conjunctural matriarchy behind the Iron Curtain (fig. 14). The author uses the word "saint" ironically with reference to the idealizing concept of Pan-Slavism inoculated in Eastern Europe since the mid-19th century by the Russian Empire (Ghezzi, 2021).

British artist of Nigerian origin, Yinka Shonibare depicts five scenes from the life of a dandy, scenes performed by the artist himself. For his series, Shonibare constructs frames representing different moments of a day, staged in historical interiors with a consistent cast of actors and with the artist himself wearing elegant Victorian clothes (fig. 15). The Caucasian characters each play their roles in an extremely expressive way, but they seem to be blind to the artist's skin color. His place in Victorian society is protected by his figure as a dandy, his pronounced artificial stature, concerned with simulating a certain kind of authenticity. This series finds its correspondence in Hogarth's drawings, seen as a satire on the state of contemporary society, they being multiplied and published as prints, which actually represented the forms of mass transmission used in the 18th century. Shonibare's *Victorian Dandy* cycle works were first commissioned to be displayed as posters on the London Underground, and that is precisely why their function was highlighted in this place of popular and commercial imagination (Cotton, 2004).

For Wang Qingsong, photography is the main instrument of his social criticism,

which, although related to specific issues in China, transcends any culture. Socio-economic changes are happening all over the world, and the global village has created new expectations and ideas about the position of each culture in modernity. As these rapid transformations take place, tradition undergoes mutations and makes way for contemporary trends. As economic emancipation has progressively become one of the government's top priorities in its national policies, the country has continued to change, and the people of China have been no exception. Capitalism has "modernized" traditional economic forms. In the 1990s and 2000s, economic reform signaled significant achievements in China, which was previously a primarily agricultural country.

Some of Wang Qingsong's photographs parodically comment on the impact of Western cultural infusion on education. Wang Qingsong's work, entitled *Follow Me* (2003), depicts the author as a teacher in front of an enormous blackboard, four meters wide and eight meters long, mounted in the Beijing Film Studios (fig. 16). The artist covered the entire surface with slogans and elements of Chinese and English terminology, reflecting the changes in Chinese history, culture, and society brought about by the economic growth of recent decades. The texts were taken mainly from English and Chinese textbooks, but especially from one of the most popular English teaching shows on Chinese state television, called *Follow Me*, first introduced in 1982. About this phenomenon, Qingsong explains: "The significance of the English teaching program went far beyond learning English. It helped Chinese people learn about the West and the world, right after China emerged from its closed-door policy. (...) Farmers, workers, soldiers and students, even monks at the Lama Temple enjoyed watching the program, which offered a window to the world, to understanding how foreigners live." The unfolding of images in a panorama filled with texts suggests the representation of a globe on which the teacher indicates the globalizing economic and cultural connections (Wang, 2020).

The huge effort made for communication development and cultural rapprochement has not been entirely successful. The work *Follow Him* (2010) talks about the problem of education in China (fig. 17). Things are learned mechanically, but not retained according to Qingsong. Information is interpreted by teachers and transferred to students who regurgitate it in turn, so that many people fail to understand the real meaning of things. The image shows a man reading at a table sitting in the middle of a gigantic space that resembles a library. Thousands of books lying on the shelves, and crumpled papers thrown on the floor suggest the idea that the form through which knowledge is acquired, the method of learning, is most often poorly understood and applied in education systems around the world (Wang, 2020).

The photograph *Follow You* (2013) depicts a supposedly huge study space, with walls covered in prints and desks laden with books, with students sleeping on their heads (fig. 18). Their attitudes reveal exhaustion, a sign that their powers of concentration have been overcome. But between them, placed centrally in the frame, we discover the figure

of a young man aged prematurely, as shown by his whitened hair and beard, still supported by infusions. Wang Qingsong knows that these young people have come to learn for their parents and grandparents, but never for themselves, for the love of knowledge itself. He states that most of his works record ongoing stories in this dramatic society. Wang Qingsong, although he constructs complex performative photographs, acts as a photojournalist capturing the contradictions we encounter in a China in full transformation.

Conclusions

The diversity of parodic approaches finds a natural way of communication through the practice of staged and performative photography. The fact that the level at which the elements in the frame can be declared recognizable in a photographic image is superior and specific to other visual artistic media, urges the author to a symbolic mode of operation. This characteristic facilitates the development of descriptive modes of expression. The narratives approached therefore take on imitative, ironic, critical and sometimes aggressive forms, in which the references belong to a collective memory. Apart from the attitudinal aspect, important for the author is the interpretative formulation used both as a comparative expression and as a way of presenting personal concepts.

List of figures

Fig. 1. Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp in Rose Sélavy, 1920, accessed 12.03.2026, online source:

<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/8084/meet-rrose-selavy-marcel-duchamp-s-female-alter-ego>

Fig. 2. Robert Morris, I Box, 1962, accessed 12.03.2026, online source:

<https://www.alminerech.com/artworks/4098-robert-morris-i-box-1962>

Fig. 3. Jeff Koons, Art Magazine Ads, Artforum, 1988, accessed 12.03.2026, online source:

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