

The (Un)Necessary Suspicious Spectator

Exhibition Review by Ekaterina Smirnova

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The exhibition “A Necessary Realism” under the curatorship of Nuno Crespo took place at the Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea do Chiado in Lisbon in 2018 from June 28 to October 28. It united a set of photographs and a video by the Portuguese visual artist José Pedro Cortes. Drawing his vocabulary from a broad period of 2005-2018, the artist invited us to see a reality that in the words of the curator is “not mechanic, linear or numerical, but rather an ontological, epistemic and aesthetic issue which demands resolution on daily basis” (Nuno Crespo, “Reflecting on the visible” in *A Necessary Realism*, 2018). The experience of the viewer of the exhibition reflects on that: we are confronted with the carefully assembled mosaics of images featuring bodies, still lives and landscapes that are a challenge to decipher. These are mundane scenes where nameless bodies of strangers live, desire and inhabit spaces without geographies; abstract territories retain the echo of the presence of the strangers as we plunge into the fragmented vision of the world with no temporal boundaries. This is symptomatic for a world where in the daily flood of images reality becomes fragmented and multi-layered with images liquidating the time-space referentiality. Time and space are instead created here in the exhibition space where the vision of the author, curator and the viewer come together in a

temporary performance. Realism is acting here as a reminder that in an age where the process of the accumulation of images achieved its unprecedented level, it is necessary to stop and look at the mundane and little everyday gestures from a critical standpoint, questioning it and not accepting as granted.

Viewers are invited to make their meanings, create connections out of the “chance” meetings of unrelated subjects and objects. Familiar scenes generate uncanny feelings: one can’t but suspect that something is brewing there, something is ready to appear in between the frames of the pictures that are exposed in such a way that they create echoes, speak with each other and with the viewers. Mundane scenes are scrutinized by the artist, put under his viewfinder and exposed in its seeming nakedness. While looking at a series of photographs *Nail Performance* (2016) that depict the complicit exposure of the elegant gestures of hands opposed with the crudeness of the badly applied nail polish, one wonders: what can be found beyond these images? Is there existence of a different layer of meanings that reveal themselves through the crudely put “nail polish” that is ready to be scratched off together with the intended realism that seems to be contaminated by an almost surrealist approach? Laurent Berlant’s words come to mind from *Cruel Optimism*, 2011: “Any account of realism requires an account of affect, and any object/ scene could come to belong to a realist genre—an anecdote, an uncanny sound, a dream, a pet, or a cookie. What matters is the presence of a relation that invests an object/scene with the prospect of the world’s continuity”. Dreamlike, fragmented and full of affect – this is the way memory works, and the way images function in this exhibition where “necessary” in the name could easily be substituted with “affective”. The exhibition is itself constructed as a living memory, where there is no chronological order. Instead, we are invited to read images in various associations with each other and to look at the ordinary as “a porous zone that absorbs lots of

incoherence and contradiction” (Laurent Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2011). We are making way through embodied affective realities of the author’s personal archive with nameless faces on portraits looking back at us with enigmatic gazes (*E.*, 2016), body fragments (*Ombro*, 2006), cityscapes (*Vertical gardens*, 2015).

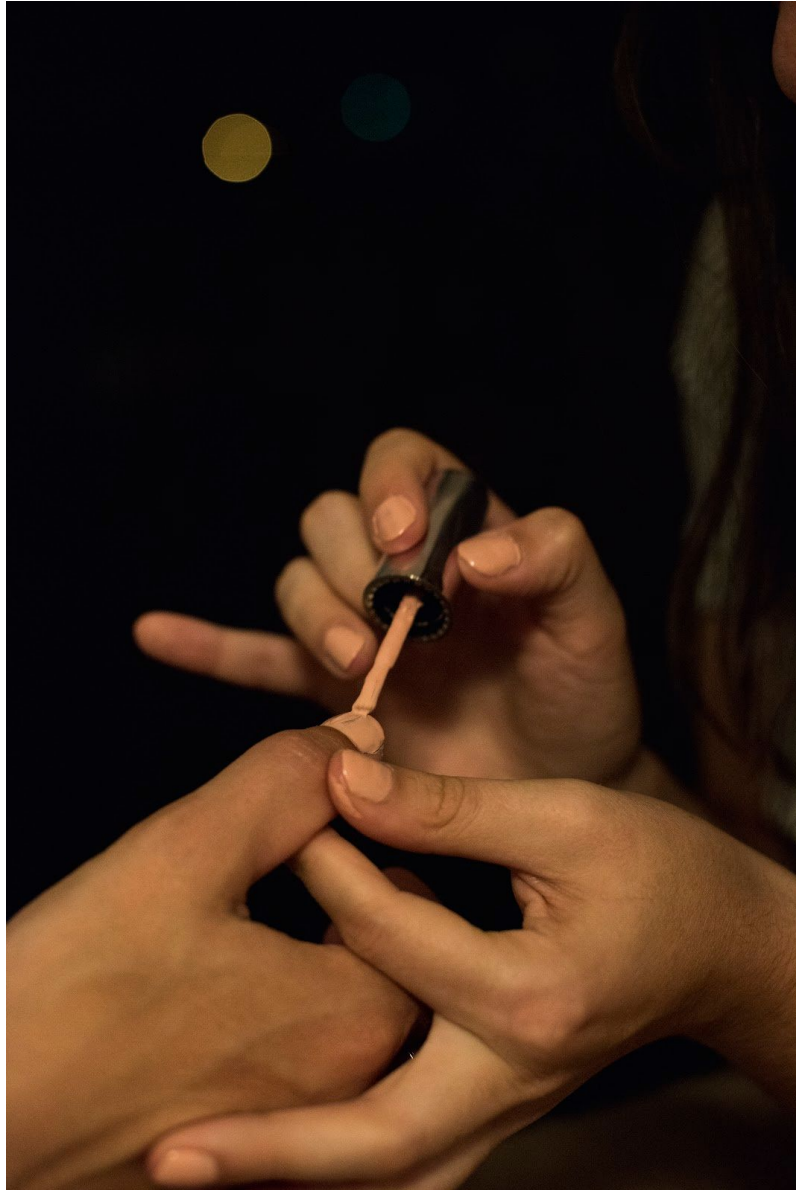
Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative* (1985) addresses the appearance of a new kind of reader, the one who is “himself suspicious, because reading ceases to be a trusting voyage made in the company of a reliable narrator, becoming instead a struggle with the implied author, a struggle leading the reader back to himself.” (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1985). In the same manner this exhibition demands for a suspicious spectator that is looking at the reality in movement through still images and that inevitably comes back to herself/himself through generated associations. The meaning of the exhibition unveils through the reality of connections and the in-betweenness created by the curator and the artist. Images gain meaning not on their own but in their interrelatedness – through associations and echoes between the images generated in the spectator. At the moment when we start suspecting that there is something else and seek for meaning beyond – we become active viewers, emancipated and suspicious spectators. The reality of interconnectedness is also a “reality of perpetual becoming” (Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 1911). Associations are made and unmade as we get more and more convinced by the author: “images which describe an experience, because the images are not the actual things, but they are themselves, namely human instruments intended to give shape to a sense of the world” (José Pedro Cortes, *A Necessary realism*, 2018).



"Nail Performance" (I)



"Nail Performance" (II)



“Nail Performance” (III)

Photography series by José Pedro Cortes in *A Necessary Realism*