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Sàlvati Salvàti
Jacopo Benassi

Opening Tuesday 17 September 2024
Until 9 November 2024

flashes of an exploding stage

With an expanded practice encompassing installation, painting, performance and sculpture, Jacopo Benassi is recognized for his unique take on photography. Since the 1980s he has documented agents and communities belonging to what is broadly understood as the underground, often affiliated with the music scene. While portraying social environments regularly excluded from mainstream visibility, his images are both a powerful statement against one-dimensional conceptions of society, as well as, and more importantly, testaments of the vital energy emerging from its margins. In this sense, Benassi's work lubricates stale notions of self and other, inserting divergence into homogeneity and liberation into repression, promoting other ways of conceiving and being in the world.

The employment of flash is arguably one of the most defining features of the artist's practice and a sharp lens through which to engage with his body of work. Emerging out of photography's developments and, in particular, Robert Bunsen and Henry Roscoe's experiments with magnesium in the mid-1800s, flash refers both to the burst of light as well as the light producing unit. The term is also used to describe fleeting apparitions or explosion-like phenomena, the latter echoing its original use as an ignition based pyrotechnic lighting process. Benassi's work spills out of his biography. Realising homosexual attraction was considered a socially deviant emotion was an early moment of spark in his life and was followed by his coming out, which coincided with the embrace of photography. In Benassi's life, two intersecting flash-like explosions came together to propel the big bang of his practice.

Whereas flash's normative function is to illuminate what the camera might not be able to capture due to poor light conditions, in reality, flash conceals as much as it reveals: its brief and intense illumination might produce contrasting highly lit sections alongside darkened areas on the edges of an image. As it follows, Benassi's recurrent employment of flash is densely resonant: on the one side inverting stable social dynamics of visibility and power, on the other, bringing to light flash's paradoxical silencing capabilities. By lending bursts of light to silenced figures and situations, his images function both as defiant gestures and self-reflexive critical reflections.

In *Sàlvati Salvàti*, loosely translated as Save Yourself Saved, Benassi reframes the exhibition as an apparatus to question its visitors, preventing a detached stance. Choreographed by a chaotic barricade, the gallery space embodies the conflicted period we are inhabiting and underlines the impossibility of an outside. In Europe and among other examples, barricades propose echoes of the May 68 and the French Revolution, pivotal references to political imaginaries underpinning current social configurations. At the same time, its belligerent quality might also be understood as direct reference to ongoing conflicts in places such as Ukraine, Palestine or Sudan. Via its intrinsic configuration, the barricade also manifests as a marker of our contested societies, progressively defined by processes of fragmentation and polarization. While combining these readings, because of its gallery setting the barricade also voices questions related to the agency of art.

Whereas Benassi might speak from a subjective point of view, his work engages with wide social issues, and, here in particular, connects with the generalised anger-driven,

confused mindset of our present times. Josh Cohen, psychoanalyst and emeritus professor of English at Goldsmiths, University of London, argues that feelings of anger are a “defining emotional texture of our daily social and political lives, giving rise to a pervasive atmosphere of mutual fear, suspicion and accusation, in which any perception of difference – cultural, ideological, racial, sexual, class – shades quickly into the assumption of enmity.” Benassi’s barricade seems to embody Cohen’s assumptions and reframes the gallery space as a public forum. The central installation is accompanied by sculptural assemblages of photographs, where images cover other images in sets bounded by tense straps.

These works enhance the exhibition’s reverberations of our critical context: the hidden images manifesting simultaneously as lighthouses and hideouts of silenced, repressed forces, blocking the represented scenes to stimulate an imaginative interaction. Likewise, understood as tense near-to-collapse instances of inclusion and exclusion, the strained strapped sets project menacing possibilities of social explosions, actualizing a liminal position: preceding bursts of energy as well as illustrating their aftermath. The four performances presented during the exhibition period intensify these tensions, creating ephemeral live communities of strangers by placing audience members in the same place at the same time, a contrast with the diffused pace of a common gallery visit. The proposed detonation of dominant narratives is notably manifested by *Brutal Casual*, where photographic authorship is given to the public. In *Sàlvati Salvàti* the unknown materialises as a porous form open to multiple possibilities.

Numerous signs alert to the dangers of a reiteration of the 1930s, a period similar to what Gramsci defined as a decaying period, where the new world struggles to be born and monsters emerge. Addressing the current post-Brexit climate and attempting to offer a way forward, Josh Cohen argues that in order to resist far-right populism “it is not so much the rational appeal to facts we need to be making so much as contact with the depth and complexity of our feelings.” For the psychoanalyst “lurking under (...) coiled anger is a rich and complex seam of emotional experience we should be listening to (...), instead of to the noisy slogans drowning it out.” In *Sàlvati Salvàti* Benassi offers both an bewildered flashing warning and a stage where anger and confusion can be experienced and expressed collectively. Instead of a death-drive deepening dispute, we find a space to uncover possibilities and bypass excluding boundaries, categories and understandings. We are invited to a space of conflict where we can enact and reflect our feelings, overcoming the fear which eats the soul.

João Laia

Jacopo Benassi (La Spezia, IT 1970) begins to move in the world of photography in the 1980s, in particular through environments linked to underground music. Over the years his research became wider and began to include portraits and self-portraits, performances, painting, nature and the world of fashion, while maintaining, however, as a sort of constant, a very intimate and introspective way of taking pictures. Jacopo has participated in various exhibitions and many events in institutions such as the Centro Pecci in Prato, Tate in London and the Palais De Tokyo in Paris. He has produced numerous publications including books and fanzines, among the others FAGS edited by nero, The Belt by Skira, Bologna Portraits by Damiani, The Eyes Can See What The Mouth Can Not Say by Peperoni books, Gli aspetti irrilevanti by Mondadori. He has collaborated with directors and writers such as Paolo Sorrentino, Daniele Cipri, Asia Argento and Maurizio Maggiani and has followed and created various advertising campaigns in the fashion sector. Jacopo has also followed the cultural program of Btomic, a famous club in La Spezia, for which he has created self-produced editorial projects related to the alternative music scene proposed by the venue. Despite the innumerable experiences he managed to be in contact with, Jacopo has managed to transversally crossing different fields and moving between heterogeneous disciplines, the way in which he shoots remains very faithful to the approach with which he began: the depth of field is canceled by the light of the flash. Benassi has made this characteristic of rapid and instinctive photography of underground cultures which often requires flash and short exposure times to portray clandestine and lightless situations his signature style, thus giving his research a raw character and powerful. With Jacopo Benassi, photography becomes sculpture, not only because the flash cuts out the silhouettes of his subjects with precision, but because the shot itself enters into dialogue with the artist’s frames, assembled by the artist himself, which thus make each work unique and unrepeatable. Jacopo never ceases to suggest that the will to create would not exist without the will to destroy: frames burned or made with accepted wood and cut glass, a tribute to imperfection that allows us to measure the complexity and roughness of things. Assemblies of photographic, material and pictorial elements find their stability thanks to the grip of an industrial anchor belt. With them Jacopo speaks to us with a disarming courage of fragility and the constant search for balance.