

PER NASO E PER DONO

Letizia Battaglia and Stefania Galegati, Palermo

The Absurd Sense of Life

Eleonora Lombardo

To see is to feel, to feel is to see. Sooner or later, someone should write a treatise on the anatomy and physiology of women artists, mapping their bodies and analyzing how their emotional processes function. Because women artists have special organs, arranged differently. The heart is everywhere and intelligence has the usefulness of an appendix; eyes are used to see what is not there, and the nose is an “ultra-sense,” the breath that connects the outer world to inner life. The ears observe the past; within memory they probe the future.

Per naso e per dono is the visionary dialogue between two artists, Letizia Battaglia and Stefania Galegati who, though different and distant, meet in the narrative of a city—Palermo—a narrative that becomes the device through which to look at the world, constantly intercepting the absurd sense of life. Even in death.

Through her photographs, Letizia Battaglia is monumental: the women, girls, boys, and men in her images become characters in a vast novel capable of expressing the spirit of a time, of History itself, embodying it in individual gestures, in the microscopic dimension of everyday life. Where her subjects laugh, one can hear the photographer’s laughter—a laughter in spite of everything, a firm and political decision to bring the roar of life into every circumstance, even the most unsettling. The darkness of poverty must contend with the irreverent candor of a child’s bare bottom; wealth dissolves into the excess of an aristocracy fading dance after dance; embraces and kisses do not sanctify the couple but always open toward a third (multiple) possibility; feminine sensuality is entirely a matter of mind, of the intensity of the gaze, of courage. Black-and-white images that reveal the photographer’s intention to look at her own time from the future.

Stefania Galegati is not a photographer by definition; until now she has used photography in support of her artistic practice, and it is precisely this freedom from a final intention that allows her color photographs to release hidden meanings. Everything has to do with her ability to see and to feel—to intercept where and how life speaks, thanks to the artist’s antennae that locate it everywhere.

The irrational thread of life unwinds across the world and sometimes writes Coca-Cola, an invasive yet reassuring presence like Jesus, like Che Guevara, like Maradona; at other times it becomes a giant cursive proclaiming “BONJOUR TRISTESSE,” or a warning that reads “Do not spit on the floor,” or an invitation to pray. To “choose the essential.”

Whether in a cemetery where Orsola Pace “finally rests in peace,” or in an improvised football field in the middle of nowhere, or along the streets of a colorful Africa, Stefania Galegati’s photographs arrive like a band of percussionists driving away fears and pain. There is an electrifying irony that emerges from a painful exploration of what is missing—absence, dispersion.

Per naso is an invitation to follow one’s nose and to look with it, as Galegati does, transforming absence into form; but it is also the lightness of allowing oneself to be led by the nose, without fearing ridicule, until one comes face to face with the broken noses of the statues in Villa Giulia.

I imagine them meeting there, Letizia and Stefania: *Two Women of Stone* (Battaglia, 1979). The woman who caresses and consoles the noseless statue photographed by Letizia Battaglia is, to me, the most authentic portrait of Stefania Galegati’s creative impulse. The gesture captured by Battaglia—reaching out a hand to the statue’s chest—allows the stone to become human. And here forgiveness materializes, which is always an act of generosity given “as a gift.”

A short circuit in which the violence of an affront, the disfigurement, the vandalic gesture are sublimated into a benevolent act of care—care for the gaze. What is not there makes space for what could be. Letizia and Stefania meet in an artistic and political vision that never ceases to remedy what is missing. Battaglia’s photographs, like Galegati’s images, her videos, her works, are all restitutions of life.

They meet again on the Pride Ape Car, where Galegati photographs Battaglia, the unforgettable godmother of the 2018 edition. Color and solemnity.

Palermo, experienced as a political paradigm, becomes the narrative space where the complicit, yet posthumous dialogue between Letizia Battaglia and Stefania Galegati unfolds—a play of references that imposes the smile as a guiding thread, a smile that must make noise in order to awaken us from indifference, from the laziness of the senses.

Galegati photographs the imprint of a ball striking a doorway in Palermo. The mark of the ball, like the broken nose, is the testimony of something that has happened, the proof that what cannot be seen exists in another time. Listening with the ears, one can hear the sound of the ball hitting the door. This image by Galegati, years after Letizia Battaglia's iconic photograph *The Girl with the Ball*, testifies that in Palermo children still play in the streets.

And that the dialogue between Letizia and Stefania is still ongoing.