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## ***Beyond the Lens***

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It was not until 1993 that the General Assembly of the United Nations finally adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Article One reads:

‘For the purposes of this Declaration, the term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.’

Human trafficking has for centuries been a lucrative business and is currently estimated to have a market value of over 32 billion US dollars. Forced prostitution of women is the most widespread form of human trafficking today. According to professor Kevin Bales – the world's leading expert on contemporary global slavery – poverty, deprivation, the desire for a better life and the need to escape conflict and oppression are all vital elements that bring people into contact with traffickers. Deception and false promises are important strategies employed by traffickers. Gaining the confidence of the targeted individuals and their families is an essential part of the trafficking process.

For the victim, hope turns to tragedy once transportation begins. Kevin Bales states: ‘To be without documents while in transit is to be placed immediately in

the control of the trafficker'.<sup>1</sup> The dispossession of identity is the first major act of violence aimed at the victim. Stripping away the subject's identity prepares the ground for the subject to become a non-citizen, a person without rights or protection. It's an act of violence that has similar echoes across the historical application of photography when focused on the 'Other'. 'The aim of the trafficker will be to disorientate the victim, to increase his or her dependence, to establish fear and obedience, to gain control'.<sup>2</sup> The more they resist, the greater the brutality, until – like most slaves – their will to resist is finally crushed. The journey towards a hopeful future quickly turns into a journey of utter despair, violent degradation, and possible death. The key question of what happens to an individual once the traffickers have no value for them, is rarely considered. Comparatively the value of human life has become cheaper, as more and more people attempt to escape poverty and conflict the easier it is to exploit them.

Photography is most suited to forms of documentary commentary and has historically been used to portray, frame and display people in both their most glorious and debased conditions. Theoretical debates on photography are riddled with issues concerning photography's 'indexical aspect, which comes from the fact that since a photograph results from exposure to a pre-existing entity, it directly bears the entity's imprint and can therefore supply evidence about the object it depicts'.<sup>3</sup> The production of photographic evidence opens up debates concerning power and privileging regimes of knowledge that are rooted in debates regarding state control over the individual subject, crime,

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Bales, *Understanding Global Slavery*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005, page 145

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Bales, *Understanding Global Slavery*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005, page 141

<sup>3</sup> Tom Gunning, 'Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detection, and early Cinema', in *Cinema and the invention of Modern Life*, Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (eds.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p.20

punishment and societal classification coupled with enquiries into the nature of western scopic power.

The photographs from Dana Popa's series *not Natasha* perform several tasks. As a body of documentary photographs they function to serve as a reminder of the wide reaching effects of human trafficking on the individual subject, the victim. Popa's photographs work primarily within the classic tradition of the documentary genre where, 'Causality is vague, blame is not assigned, fate cannot be overcome'.<sup>4</sup> Her use of colour is a deliberate turn away from the gritty and distant realism associated with black-and-white documentary photography. Colour brings the viewer closer to the victim and effectively closes the distance between them and us.

Popa's photographs are essentially an enquiry into an acute and pervasive form of violence against women. The loss and absence portrayed in Popa's photographs resonate with the violence associated with forms of cultural erasure, in which names are changed, histories are re-written and deep rooted societal relationships are severed. Popa's photographs are a tragic reminder of just how vulnerable and powerless women are globally, and the absence displayed exposes the futility of universal declarations. Popa's photographs act as metaphorical markers on the social conditions across cultures that have served to lock women into forms of masculine servitude.

In an additional cruel visual twist, Popa invites us to recognise the other form of violence that is at play throughout this work; the ongoing misery of those who have been left behind to wait in the hope that one day the loved will return home. The portraits of those who can only wait and the photographs they cling to – of those that have been trafficked – become tragic icons of hope, as the person who has departed will never again fit the image that is held up for us to observe.

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<sup>4</sup> 4. Martha Rosler, *3 works*, The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006, p.76

The psychological damage inflicted on those who have managed to return home is beyond the spectacle of any one photograph. The photographic image in this instance cannot carry the burden of personal experience. Popa represents the women who return home through a veiled sense of shame; their identities have to be altered for the sake of their own protection.

Popa's extensive project, which has been several years in the making, attempts to address the wider impact that human trafficking has on the family and extended social relations. The photographs serve to memorialise those who have vanished. They also operate as tools of testimony for those who have returned. As documents, the photographs prove nothing. Instead they act as signifiers of emptiness, waiting, emotional damage and external harm. Within this body of photographs, the doctrine of any decisive moment is clearly abandoned and what is revealed is the importance of time exchanged between the photographer and the subject. There is no critical moment of entrapment or release relating to the subject in focus. These photographs offer no reprieve from the violence experienced by these women and their families. The interiority of the photographic work, the empty rooms, the dark and claustrophobic spaces, portray a chronic condition of despair and highlight the catastrophic conditions that make it possible for human trafficking to thrive. Popa's investment in the subject is therefore beyond the lens. Her photographs operate as markers of her intention to take action and responsibility.

"Catastrophe, as it is usually understood emerges, erupting as an event, sharply drawing the line between before and after, manufacturing its emergence as a riddle: How and why is this happening? Why now? Why in this manner? What to do about catastrophe requires exhaustive research that could bring to the surface more and more facts to explain its eventuation. But the verge of catastrophe, does not emerge, it is not exactly an event, and has no power to create a difference. It exists on the surface, completely open to the gaze and yet evading it, because there is nothing to distinguish it from the

surroundings in which it exists”.<sup>5</sup> Popa’s photographic project focuses on two distinctive visual forms of violence that in essence should not be separated from each other: the violence of poverty and the violence of exploitation. By focusing on domestic interiors Popa signifies to her audience that it is not enough to simply talk about the actual victim of trafficking, that it is not enough to highlight how the victims have been abused and the personal torment they have suffered both mentally and physically. None of this makes sense unless we take time to analyse the cultural and economic conditions that make it possible for women’s lives to be seen only in terms of their potential for exploitation. Documentary photography has in many regards taken a theoretical battering over the last few decades, however in a celebrity obsessed globalised world the real value of documentary photography is that it reminds us of our privileged self. It will always tell us as much about ourselves as it does about the subject in focus.

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**Mark Sealy** became Director of Autograph ABP in 1991, where he has initiated the production of over thirty publications, produced global exhibitions, alongside commissions and residencies projects. Sealy has a special interest in art and its relationship to social change and Human Rights He is a founding CEO of Rivington Place, the first permanent visual arts space in London dedicated to issues of cultural diversity. It opened in October 2007.

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<sup>5</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books New York, 2008, p.