Who was Natalie Brettschneider?

Lorna Brown

If one were to attempt to piece together the life of this New Westminster-born opera singer from the photographic archive presented by Carol Sawyer, the results would strain credibility. Persuasive photographs, presented in a serious looking archival display, place her in Paris modeling haute couture hats; posed in a droll double portrait with an African mask that nods to Man Ray, and poignantly interacting with a rhubarb leaf in a back yard closer to home. Along the way, donning an aproned housedress with a fruit dish on her head, she cavorted in a pots-and-pans orchestra for the Coverdale Jaycees. She sang earnestly in operettas, loved fashion and art, and was
Carol Sawyer, Natalie Brettschneider with friends Lori Weidenhammer and Soressa Gardner. 1951, 2013
photograph: digital print on photographic paper from scanned negatives, photography by Blaine Campbell
28.0 x 21.8 cm, sheet, 25.3 x 20.3 cm image (HxW), SAG2013.03.01
a good sport. She appeared completely comfortable in front of the cameras that were seemingly wielded, alternately, by modern masters, back-stage press photographers, and studio professionals.

Natalie Brettschneider is, of course, Anonymous. In the staggering volume of photographic records that have accumulated since the beginning of the technology, as it became the ubiquitous form of image making, untold millions of women have posed and reflected light back into the lens. They are the question marks penciled on the back of family snapshots, named 'unknown' in archival indices, or are merely absent from the caption or title. For Carol Sawyer, the unknown woman becomes an undefined space full of imaginative potential as she creates for her a fictional identity. Natalie Brettschneider becomes the means to explore an artistic life that can include high art and pop culture; the European avant garde between world wars, and strains of interdisciplinary experimentation and collaborative practice across the centuries. Sawyer places herself, in the guise of Natalie, at the dueling centres of the art world and also at its geographical and aesthetic margins.

Carol Sawyer has an impressive breadth in her artistic practice: in addition to photography and video production, she performs as a vocalist in the ion Zoo ensemble. She has produced large-scale works in public spaces and has intimately documented abandoned dwellings in old Vancouver neighbourhoods. In the Natalie Brettschneider works, her knowledge of the history of photography and her ability to use its full range of conventions is much in evidence. As she pictures Natalie across time and place, she adopts the photographic techniques of the theatrical production still, the family snapshot, the graphic formalism of the modernist, and the immediacy of the newspaper image. And, as she stands in for the fictional Natalie, Sawyer simultaneously stands in for the men that released the shutter.

Natalie Brettschneider with friends Lori Weidenhammer and Soressa Gardner, 1951 (2013), takes the form of a contact sheet, a test exposure in which the film is laid out as an index to all the frames on a roll of film. Photographers use this process to select particular frames to enlarge, but Sawyer presents it entirely, to capture the complete photo session. The interaction of the three friends develops from the first few frames in which the women seem to warm up, then, overcoming their self-conscious blushing they bashfully strike their poses. Their props and costumes—jelly molds, colanders, whisks—whether tied to their heads or used as percussion instruments, tie the performers to the kitchens of mid-century suburbia, who have stepped into the backstage area of a community hall. One can imagine the local press photographer, using a flash and multiple exposures to capture the women at first uneasy, then taking on their performative roles. While Natalie is a fiction, her friends’ real names are in the title: Soressa Gardner is a composer and classically trained vocalist and Lori Weidenhammer is a media and performance artist. As they have improvised as colleagues in the music community, they now improvise with Sawyer before the camera. They work from a series of images found by the artist in the records of the Cloverdale chapter of the Jay-Cees, the colloquial name for the international social service organization ‘Junior Citizens’ or alternately the ‘Junior Chamber of Commerce’. Performing good works was a way to demonstrate the basis of the Jaycees creed, that ‘service to humanity is the best work of life.’
Presumably, the three women’s musical performance in 1951 was an amateur recital in aid of the Jaycees charitable goals, yet the pots-and-pans orchestra, as a form, has manifested in many ways. The contemporary Montreal performance art collective Women With Kitchen Appliances has updated the concept to include washing machines and blenders as well as ‘analogue’ tools in their deadpan feminist interventions. The Pots N Pans Orchestra is a project of Apartment Music, a long-running series of concerts of experimental, improvisation, electronic and noise music in a Gainesville Florida residence. And, of course, pots-and-pans orchestras have a long history in street demonstrations. Recently, the phenomenon has spread from the cacerolazo or cacerolada deployed by street activists in Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Columbia, Uruguay and Spain, to the Quebec casseroles protests in opposition to the 2012 adoption of Bill 78, an act which restricts the right of the public to assemble, after peaceful protests were met with police violence in Montreal and Victoriaville. Iceland’s ‘Kitchenware Revolution’ refers to the pots-and-pans protests following the 2008 financial crisis, and the technique surfaced loudly in the 2013 protests in Turkey. When tear gas attacks forced protesters into their homes in Istanbul, they continued to bang pots and pans indoors, with the result that the entire city was heard to reverberate through the night. As a form, the pots-and-pans orchestra appeals to avant garde musicians and revolutionaries alike—the instruments are always on hand and as repurposed objects, lend themselves to improvisation and encourage broad participation. Open to amateur and professional, the pots-and-pans performance, in concert or in protest, is about making noise, registering a presence through sound—whether the virtuosic percussionists’ improvisation or the collective resistance of a crowd.

Sawyer uses the filmic structure of the image sequence in a contact sheet format to capture and convey the re-enactment of a seemingly wholesome, comic performance. Yet, as we consider the work through the years that have passed between the original document and the re-staging, complexities arise. To invite two accomplished colleagues to join her in representing themselves as earnest amateurs is to ask them to situate themselves in an uncomfortable historical position for professional women. In post-war North America, the public role of women was significantly diminished: public policy and the new influence of mass advertising pressured women to leave the work force and professional life. Although it was an economically abundant era, there is scant reason to feel nostalgic for such supposedly ‘simpler
times.’ As Sawyer, Gardner and Weidenhammer jointly craft their re-enactment, this complexity and conflict underscores their performance.

The character Natalie gives Sawyer an alibi to traverse the time before there was a perceived necessity to manage one’s own identity as a consistent ‘brand’ in one’s professional and personal life. As Natalie, she can destabilize the hierarchies of art that give differing status to professional and amateur practices and to fine art photography and commercial image making—and to take pleasure in doing so. We, as viewers, can join in her amusement and are complicit in her questioning of photography’s capacity to demonstrate the truth of any one identity.

Notes