

ELFIE SEMOTAN



CONTRADICTION

AN EYE FOR NUANCES

Christian Reder

On the evening before my initial conversation with Elfie Semotan for this essay, ninety-year-old Agnès Varda's 1985 film about dropout Mona's tireless search for freedom, *Vagabond (Sans toit ni loi / With Neither Shelter Nor Law)* was being shown on Arte. This reminded me of my conversations with Semotan about her New York portraits of ninety-year-old artist Louise Bourgeois, whom she described as carrying her whole life in her face. During that discussion, Semotan spoke of the emotional connection she had to achieve, establishing something in the interstices separating her and Bourgeois in order to "see her complexity with greater clarity and capture it (an apt word, capture) in pictures. But I had to make sure that this openness didn't lose its mysterious infinity either."

Such comments on Semotan's way of thinking and working, published in a number of texts she and I have coauthored, evidence a careful attentiveness to people, to their lives, to possibilities, interstitial spaces, and qualities. When taking photos, she constantly asks herself "Does this have it?"—and, sometimes, the answer may well be no. That's why she will take the time to find subtle differences and capture moments that go beyond freezing time in place. In her words, "Memory obviously preserves individual moments much more exactly than it does longer sequences of time." According to Semotan, these moments make us aware of how receptive we can be and how our experiences are preserved; small deviations from the usual are the most likely to challenge our ability to perceive. But however amusing our modern addiction to images may seem to be, the billions of superfluous photographs that flood the public space dissolve everything into a visually indifferent mass and together form "a new tendency toward similar points of view." In order to go on creating worthwhile photographs in this climate, Semotan increasingly focuses on depicting life without people. She says people have fewer expectations of this genre, and by focusing on objects and arrangements, she experiences the freedom of "not having to repeat something that's been seen a thousand times." In her view, even the ideal working conditions of the fashion and advertising industries ultimately lead to uniformity thanks to their allegedly neutral standards of selection. Photographs that appear to be still lifes are purely about her ways of seeing. But images of people contain "a multilayered and demanding interrelationship, and are often a very conscious act of staging." This is why appealing connections that she discovers by complete coincidence, which do not beg to be explained, have grown increasingly important to her. For her, language is not sufficient to describe and explain music and the visual, but ideally, those images containing multiple interpretations should come across as complex texts. Semotan is interested in things that are "usually overlooked and remain unseen" precisely because they aren't perceived as something worth looking at, and thus do not merit being photographed. Hence the question for her is what each of us considers worthy of attention, what stands out to us, what leads us to pick up on something as worthy of notice. "Reconsidering this and then deviating from learned habits is always a useful way of self-analyzing and broadening our perspectives," says the artist.

Semotan never tries to simulate timelessness in her photography, because for her, time makes itself apparent on its own. It leaves traces regardless, especially in things that are not evidently temporal, and nobody can "stand completely outside it" either. She considers aesthetics important because if we do not consider the way things look, many things would not be noticed at all; but equally she thinks that what is accepted is necessarily trite. This is why she is agitating for every type of beauty to be accepted, including those that society still has not recognized as being beautiful or those we just have not encountered before. This is her way of fighting against oppression, a battle that she considers as relevant as

ever. She seemingly locates her art in the interstices of judgments that we make, using things that are diffuse, incidental, unnoticed, and imperious to superficial labels in order to express a world view which rebalances an emphasis. In her view, our vision needs constant expansion for the precise reason that our society faces so many acute problems. Semotan aims to sketch connections. As she describes it, "Nothing remains unchanged. Everything continues to develop; but how do we perceive this development?" She maintains, "My chosen theme is how things are, and that extends to include seemingly secondary details, in order to observe and give equal status to things that go unnoticed."

Because absolute perfection has always been demanded of Semotan, her current focus is on contradictions. She prevents her work from descending into randomness, she emphasizes, by deeply involving her own experiences. Her photos may correspond to memories, but she sees no reason why they should communicate that; anyway, her work can give rise to new ideas after the fact. In her new photos, light and shadow render the unremarkable unique. Diffuse gray tones expand arrangements of space into eternity. The corners of buildings, fences, wires, and power lines shape the images without evoking a deliberate designing hand. Misty pictures of overgrown shrubbery present nature as self-sufficient and independent. Leafless trees and plants make tangible the absence of warmth. The garden gate featured in one photograph may never have been used, but that is irrelevant. The presence of a bird, a child's hand, a plastic ball suggests that, *around the image, the world goes on as usual.* We see that Semotan is particularly attracted to unusual moments, sharply defined or softly blended lights, and fleeting glimpses. She is fascinated by elements that unintentionally structure space, and all things that influence their environment. She connects the moments where her work cautiously responds to a latent sensibility with feelings of freedom, with "basic stuff in a way." Each of her photographs contains enough material for an essay on associations, but this would steer the viewer's gaze onto a track determined by others. Her work is unique exactly because her photographs consistently depict unrepeatable situations. To avoid falsifying our immediate perception of something as a whole, she almost never crops her photographs and rejects all digital manipulation techniques.

The fact that she has been steeped in the avant-garde art world for decades and looked at thousands of images and objects has obviously given her an instinctive confidence, she notes. "But a photograph is more obviously about a specific moment and perspective taken. One cannot do much more than let the light and photographic technique have their say." To preserve her freedom, Semotan refuses to subjugate herself to the dictum that art is separate from all else—from photography, prints, design, and fashion. The aggressive maintenance of such divisions has always annoyed her greatly, which is why she does not aim to create photographs regarded as examples of fine art. Approval from others—particularly experts—matters little to her. For Semotan, the decisive factors are instead rigor, precision, and the transformation of feelings. She would hardly have pursued these qualities for so long if they had not proffered a serious field of work, one which compels her to engage in debate. As she says, "There's no use in just setting out to solely be a fine-art photographer." Above all, she aims to "direct the gaze towards nuances." It is a research practice effected with artistic tools, and a subtle way of making visible the hidden elements of everyday life.

Christian Reder is a scholar and essayist living in Vienna. His many publications include texts about Elfie Semotan and artists from her circle such as Kurt Kocherscheidt and Helmut Lang.