



Mark Helfrich, *Naked Pictures of My Ex-Girlfriends. Romance in the 70s*. Los Angeles: Rat Press, 2000. 30 pages. A hardcover photobook.

The title of Mark Helfrich's famous photobook, uncomplicated as it is, has proven to be most efficient. For over two decades, it has continued to attract the attention of audiences world-wide to the author's intimate trip down the (erotic) memory lane. The book's phenomenon, however, does not lend itself to being reduced to the catchy title alone, nor would it do justice to the author to dismiss his work as a primitive exercise in sensationalism. In his *New Yorker* article, published in 2000, Mark Singer explains the book's origins thus:

Mark Helfrich, a forty-seven-year-old professional film editor and amateur photographer who lives in Los Angeles, was thinking merely mercenary thoughts one particular day seven years ago while perusing a box of old black-and-white and color prints—mostly, naked pictures of his ex-girlfriends. Mainly, he was recalling how happy he'd been when he took the photographs and how excellent his subjects looked naked. It occurred to him that a carefully chosen portfolio would make an interesting book, and about a nanosecond later the thought occurred that sales probably wouldn't suffer if its title was "Naked Pictures of My Ex-Girlfriends." [...] "I think for the people who look at this book the pictures are voyeuristic, because you're looking at somebody else's girlfriends," Mr. Helfrich said the other day during a phone conversation. "By the same token, I feel that other men can recognize one or two of their girlfriends in the stories or shots. I wanted the photographs to look like a boyfriend took them [...]."¹

Beyond doubt, voyeurism is a powerful factor contributing to the commercial success of any product of culture that involves nudity, or allows one a peak into the sphere of somebody else's privacy. However, unlike contemporary pornography or Big Brother-type reality shows – both of which misrepresent and warp human relations, depriving them of the sense of intimacy or warmth – Helfrich's photobook's essential value lies in the serenity of his reflection upon

1. Mark Singer, "Dept. of Free Love How to Make the Most of Some Sexy Snapshots," *The New Yorker*, April 10, 2000, 32. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2000/04/10/dept-of-free-love-how-to-make-the-most-of-some-sexy-snapshots> (10.12.2020).

the passage of time. The subtitle of the book, *Romance in the 70s*, aptly directs its audiences towards treating its mininarratives and its photographic material as a point of departure for a heart-warming reflection upon the joys of youth: upon the thrills of the early explorations of our sexuality, upon the formative role of the first dramatic experiences of falling in and out of love, upon the beauty of those we loved, and, last but not least, upon our own transience. In this context, Helfrich's statement, printed on the back cover of the book, explains his position – and his intentions – in a straightforward fashion:

THE 1970s. The Vietnam war, the gas crisis, the streak, Nixon, Kent State, Watergate, Ford, WIN buttons, the bicentennial, Carter, Patty Hearst, Bowie, flairs, hot pants, platform shoes, Mork, Mindy, disco, punk... lots of meaningful relationships, but lots of casual couplings, too. Those were different times. I feel fortunate to belong to the last generation who could really enjoy carefree sex.

This book is a toast to those days. I love taking pictures. I always have my Nikon camera with me. I favor black and white film. It was really no big deal photographing my girlfriends topless or nude, almost all of them were thrilled to pose for me, because they knew I was so into it. It was fun. It was like playing a game. It was like living Antonioni's "Blow-up." Sometimes it was foreplay...

I've remained friends with most of my ex-es, and I asked their permission to publicly display these intimate photos. In the same spirit that the snapshots originally were taken, the women consented².

Forty-seven in the year 2000, Mark Helfrich is sixty-seven years old today. To those of us who "have been there," it is obvious that the girlfriends in his photobooks are now lady-friends – and that some of them, now departed, remain present *only* in the pictures. Reading Helfrich's very simple, very intimate, rhetorically unadorned commentaries to the images, we cannot help but smile when we catch ourselves reminiscing about our own first attempts to comprehend our own bodies, about the innocence of our curiosity, about the fascination with the body we dearly desired. Now, time-worn, experienced, sometimes ailing, and – irrespective of the anti-ageist lingo – painfully aware that our bodies will never be as spectacular as they once were, we silently admit to ourselves that we wish we had taken such pictures for our own memory's sake. It is only now, when it is gone, that we seem to be ready to celebrate the purity of our own, shameless, beautiful youth.

Too late. The book's black pages trigger an association with an obituary for the long gone nineteen-seventies – and for our long departed innocence. The white font of the book – imitating handwriting reminiscent of the intimacy

2. Mark Helfrich, *Naked Pictures of My Ex-Girlfriends. Romance in the 70s* (Los Angeles: Rat Press, 2000). Text on the back cover of the book.

of old letters, now ousted by email – the (mostly) black-and-white images, standard at the time, but typical of “artistic” photography of today, the sparing design of the cover – all of these elements invite interpretations of a more somber nature. If Helfrich’s photobook is indeed the last farewell to the irrecuperable past, it is perhaps time to revise our own agendas. Caught in the cogs of daily routines, constantly in the treadmill, perpetually with our noses to the grindstone, we routinely postpone our moments of joy. All too often do we forgo celebrating what we still have in the name of some vague reward in an indefinite future. A future, which may never come. Perhaps a series of naked pictures taken today would bring smile to our faces twenty years from now? Perhaps a mindful liberation from what we “must do” professionally and a better balance between the pleasures and joys of life and life’s necessities would do us good? Perhaps rediscovering the cheer of love and exultation of simple desire could make us happier – and better – people?

Against the cruel hegemony of the passing time, and contrary to its somber colors, joy lives on in Helfrich’s photobook, perpetuated in his images of smiling women without guilt or shame, and preserved within his, frequently impish, mini-narratives. Pulsing with youthful beauty, posing for their boyfriend’s camera, the universalized ex-girlfriends continue to enjoy the thrill of the perpetual moment of elation, their shyness permanently struggling with their courage, their eyes always declaring love. Love, to the reciprocity of which the photographer’s work obviously testifies.

Time to play some Bowie.

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