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An Imaged Life. Wanda Wulz and the Familiar Archive

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Perhaps [...] it is best to take events out of the sequence of one story, as we have tried to do here, and allow them to shape themselves into a number of possible stories, stories that may or may not cohere.


EXCERPT

In a picture taken by the Fratelli Alinari studio around the year 1900, entitled ‘Allegory of Photography’, photography is represented as a woman surrounded by the tools of the trade. She is a smiling, round-faced girl. With the right hand, she holds a mirror that reflects the lower part of her body (her side) towards the viewer. In the left hand, triumphantly raised in display, she holds the shutter release of a big camera on a tripod. She stands on an invisible stool that allows her long gown (a draped sheet, really, just like the ones that photographers hang behind their subjects) to fall and fold elegantly onto the floor. On the right side (from the viewer’s perspective) of the sheet there are different tools and photographic instruments: an objective, a frame, a mortar, two glass bottles, two larger glass containers with funnels on top (presumably of binders or photosensitive substances), and a photographic album that is standing on its spine, open at a page displaying a picture of the Brunelleschi cupola.

This is photography in the year 1900, a very successful, positive (and positivistic) entreprise that two generations of Florence-based Alinari photographers and a score of other male professionals in Italy have been transforming from a craftsman endeavour into an indispensable technology to visually inventory Italian art, monuments, landscapes and people. Perched from the beginning and ever since, between art and technology, photography is a woman. As Marina Warner explains in her classic analysis of the gendering of metaphorical images, allegories are traditionally produced by a male imaginary. As ‘predominant conveyors of ulterior meanings’ through the centuries, ‘the female provides the stuff of origin (*hyle*) while the male stamps it with form and gives it identity and shape.’ Female bodies signify the relationship to abstract notions, techniques, and technologies (Italy, Fortune, the arts) from the standpoint of a male subject. Each image comes equipped with a vocabulary of desire and knowledge that always preemptively founds the acting subject (the one *making* photography) as male.

This essay considers one of the first historical instances in Italy in which the female eye found her way behind the camera, and in so doing contributed to the history of photography and to the de-allegorization, so to speak, of female photographic agency. I consider here the specific professional and biographic trajectory of photographer Wanda Wulz.

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Wulz, together with references that illustrate the professional contributions that her father, Carlo, and her sister, Marion, also made to the history of photography. This essay will also discuss both the specific individual artistic achievements of Wanda, an extremely innovative artist, and how the Wulz archive, the macro-structure within which Wanda is inscribed as a member of this photographers’ family, contributes to shape her identity and her history as a woman and as a professional.4

Wanda Wulz (Trieste, 1903-1984) belongs to an eminent lineage of Triestine professional photographers. Her grandfather, Giuseppe Wulz (1843-1918), had started his activity in 1860, as a seventeen year old apprentice, and in 1868 had opened shop as an independent professional. Wanda and Marion’s father, Carlo (1874-1928), is officially entrusted with the studio in October 1912 after a dramatic fire entirely destroyed it in July. Settled on the upper floor of the central Hirschl Palace, in Trieste, since 1891, the

4 The scope of this essay is necessarily limited, especially when considering the wealth of material available in the Wulz archive. As there is, to date, not much critical work on the Wulz production, I hope to open a new door into this family’s artistic achievements. In 1981 a retrospective show was accompanied by the catalogue I Wulz. Tre generazioni di fotografi a Trieste dal 1868 al 1981. Mostra tenutasi il 21 novembre – 15 dicembre 1981, sala comunale di palazzo Costanzi, ed. by Licia Zennaro (Trieste: Tipo/Lito Stella, 1981), that remains a precious source for basic information. Most of the critical literature is either tied to shows and catalogues produced by the Alinari firm after their acquisition of the Wulz Archive, around 1988 (most importantly, La Trieste dei Wulz. Volti di una storia fotografica 1860-1980, ed. by Elvio Guagnini and Italo Zannier [Florence: Alinari 1989]) or to Wanda Wulz’s involvement in futurism in the 1930s (as in Giovanni Lista’s limited edition Futurismo e fotografia [Milan: Multipla Edizioni, 1979], and subsequent similar publications in Italian and English by the same author, most recently Il futurismo nella fotografia [Florence: Alinari, 2009]). Together with Zennaro and Lista, the most knowledgeable scholar on Wanda Wulz is Berlin-based Katharina Hausel. Hausel completed a doctoral dissertation on Wanda Wulz and her family, ‘Die Experimentellen Werke der Triester Photographin Wanda Wulz (1903-1984) im Spiegel ihres Umfeldes’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Berlin, 2004). I benefited enormously from Katharina’s expertise, and from the possibility to consult two of her unpublished works: the introduction to her dissertation (‘Wulz Gegenstand der Untersuchung’) and the text of a presentation on Wulz from 2008 (‘Zusammenfassung zum Vortrag am 11.12.2008’), from which I quote. I want to thank George Tatget, former ‘Direttore della fotografia’ at the Alinari, for his helpful email communications (April and July 2012), and the Archivio Alinari, in particular in the persons of Stefania Rispoli, Valentina Capitini, and Ferruccio Malandrini, for facilitating the consultation of their library during the summer 2011. Alessandra Biagianti helped me with the copyright acquisition process. My student Stirling Spasaro, a professional photographer, lent me her trained eyes in a couple of instances. Patty Keller put me in the direction of very relevant bibliographic references, Karl Zimmer and Jordan Perry taught me many things about English turns of phrases. I am very grateful to all of them for their help. I owe my acquaintance with the Alinari firm to my great friend Alessandra Raffieri, who unintentionally sparked my interest in photography many years ago. Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to Rhiannon N. Welch, who is the most thoughtful reader one could ever ask for. Imprecisions and mistakes are mine.
Studio fotografico Wulz thus works practically uninterruptedly for three generations, until Marion and Wanda, who have no heirs, close it in 1980.5

Just like his father before him, Carlo builds his professional reputation on respectfully portraying the Triestine middle and upper classes and their public and private environments. He explores the possibilities of photography within the rather traditional boundaries of established, fixed (also literally, in terms of its subjects’ poses) genres. Carlo’s production consists in large part of family portraits, photographs of costumed youth for carnival and balls, and professional portraiture - showcasing the occupations of (mostly male) individuals and groups. He works on female nudes, a lucrative as well as potentially artistically fertile genre, but also on documenting specific professional and social environments tied to the same social classes he habitually works with (rooms and machinery in the ‘Compagnia generale dell’elettricità’, hospital rooms, the Bemporad bookstore).

The very few ‘live’ pictures visible in Carlo’s production are tied to public occurrences, such as the funeral of the archduke Rodolfo, theatrical performances, or horse-track races. As Elvio Guagnini highlights,

> Carlo Wulz continua l’opera di Giuseppe, con cui ha lavorato a lungo. Ma, per qualche tratto, se ne discosta. […] Il gusto di una regia diversa e più originale si impone. Nelle foto di una festa al Circolo Artistico, per esempio, Carlo cerca quasi di dare al gruppo in costume classicheggiante un movimento interno, di articolarlo. E l’inquadratura e l’illuminazione delle figure sono più morbide, decadenti, sottili, psicologicamente penetranti.6

Carlo belongs within the *belle époque* of Mitteleuropean Trieste, and combines a solid commercial expertise with an artistic research in line with the pictorialism and *dannunziana* style of his times.

His daughters’ (Wanda and Marion) photographic existence largely predates their own active professional role. Their early lives, as befits daughters of a photographer, are copiously chronicled by the photographs that Carlo (and grandfather Giuseppe) takes of them. These youth pictures are ambiguously balanced between different figurations of the ‘family’ picture: from the unscripted record of domestic rituals and ties, to the traditional genre of the family-unit photograph, to pictures that are more explicitly destined to a commercial fruition. The (supposedly) private domain of family life appears in the 1905 picture of ‘Wanda e Marion Wulz durante il bando’. It is a simply composed shot of the two baby sisters in a bathtub. They both look to the side of the camera with an intent expression. Marion’s right hand, moving towards her sister, is blurred, a gesture that stylistically suggests the spontaneity of a captured instant.7

5 The palace is situated on what is today Corso Italia, 19. On the fire, two news clips are reproduced on the appendix to the volume *La Trieste dei Wulz*: one is an ‘articolo apparso su “il Piccolo” sui danni provocati dall’incendio, Trieste, 5 luglio 1812’, and the other an ‘Annuncio apparso nei giornali locali circa la riapertura del “Grand Atelier Wulz”, Trieste, 5 ottobre 1912’, p.185.


7 ‘Wanda e Marion Wulz durante il bando’, 1905. Image ID: WCA-F-000942-0000. All of the photographs mentioned in this article are, unless otherwise noted, available for free
In an earlier picture, taken by Giuseppe Wulz in 1904 (Fig.1), we witness instead the more explicitly staged spectacle of the family unit. In technical and aesthetic terms, ‘Ritratto di Carlo Wulz con la moglie Angela e la piccola Wanda’ is a faithful rendering of the tenets of a stereotypical family portrait, entirely focused on the sacred triangle of its subjects. The bottom of the frame is filled by a table, on which sits little Wanda. Wanda’s mother, Angela, sits behind the table, her left elbow resting on it. Her face is in three-quarter view, and she gazes into the distance, to her right, while supporting her daughter. Carlo stands, halfway behind his daughter, and gazes to his left. The decor is bare, minimal. Behind husband and wife there is a wall whose gradation of colors – unless it is staining due to the print’s decay – creates a disorderly background.

Thematically speaking, it is an almost unsettling photograph: Carlo’s pose is rigid, almost menacing, and Angela’s gaze is fixed and distant. Their gazes cross above the child’s head and trace opposite trajectories, while at the very center of the photograph the lighter background carves a distance, a triangular empty space, between husband and wife. Within such a symbolic space, Wanda undoubtedly belongs within the father’s genealogy: she sits beneath him, in his shadow, and her left arm completes the line traced by his. With what will become her usual attitude in front of the lens, she looks straight into the camera.8

Fig.1
Fig 1. Carlo Wulz, ‘Ritratto di Carlo Wulz con la moglie Angela e la piccola Wanda’, 1904.
Credit: Raccolte Museali Fratelli Alinari (RMFA)-archivio Studio Wulz, Firenze

consultation via the online Alinari Archives, www.alinariarchives.it. The actual Wulz archive contains 1850 prints. Of those, 869 are available online as of June 2012. The number indicated in note for each photograph is the archive image ID.

8 Carlo Wulz, ‘Ritratto di Carlo Wulz con la moglie Angela e la piccola Wanda’, 1904, WSA-F-000142-0000.
The other, slightly earlier picture (it is dated ‘about 1903’, fig. 2) that introduces Wanda Wulz to the world is a photograph that marks the most explicit intersection between Carlo’s family and his professional duty. Wanda poses as a chubby newborn placed inside a fruit basket, surrounded by foliage and fruit. The feathers on her bonnet stand upright against branches of a fruit tree. The photograph, ‘La piccola Wanda Wulz posa, in una cesta di frutta, per una pubblicità’ is an advertisement for a Triestine fruit vendor, himself a member of the Wulz family, Anton Wulz (Carlo’s uncle). As a board right above the baby’s head explains, Wanda signifies a ‘5 Kg. packet’ of fruit. She is performing, so to speak, her first allegory.

The triple exposure of baby Wanda is emblematic of the blurred origins of her relationship to photography, and of the ambiguity of the notion of the familare (familiar/familial) in this biographical and artistic narrative. Wanda is the baby whose daily rituals are caught on camera to be preserved for the family’s emotional archive. She is the offspring to be framed and presented to the world with her parents through the professional eye of grandfather Giuseppe. Finally (or to start with), she is the model holding on to the edge of a fruit basket as an allegorical offering to the good commercial fortunes of the Wulz household. Within the uncertain, treacherously rich ground that is the Wulz archive, the notion of familare acquires different connotations at various moments, and according to the audiences, thereby defying all distinctions between the public and the private dimensions.

In contrast to the English language, that by 1900 had separated the more literal and etymologically-bound familial – ‘of, pertaining to, or characteristic of a family’ from a broader, more figurally understood notion of that which is familiar, the Italian language.

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9 Giuseppe Wulz, ‘La piccola Wanda Wulz posa, in una cesta di frutta, per una pubblicità’, about 1903, WCA-F-001743-0000. The same photograph is also available in the Alinari archive in a different print, mounted on a cardboard postcard: WSA-F 001903-0000.
maintains one word, *familiare*, for both usages. The lexeme *familiare* – or *famigliare*, as clearly preferred by the etymologist – is described in the monumental Tommaseo-Bellini dictionary (1861-1879) in its multiplicity of meanings. Often a synonym of domestic (n.1, that which relates to the *domus*, the house), it is initially defined oppositionally, against all that which is not ‘of’ the family, against the non-habitual, the new: ‘contrapponesi a quel che non è della famiglia e a quel che è lontano e alieno da essa; e quindi al non usitato, al nuovo’ (n.1). It can also refer, though, to the confidence and proximity between both related and non-related persons, (n.2, ‘*la confidenza che prendesi con le persone’*), as well as, by extension, to one’s expertise in specific fields of knowledge (n.8, ‘*Li conosce, può ragionarne*’). When referring to ‘acts,’ it denotes an especially affectionate and straightforward manner of communicating (n.3, ‘*Maniere “tra affettuose ed affabili”’*’).

As I refer here to the notion of the ‘familiar,’ I evoke these different etymological notions as they are contained in the Italian lexeme, but also in the etymology of the English word itself. In the case of Wanda and her family, these multiple understandings of the *familiare/familiar* are crucial to fully comprehend the importance of the Wulz photographic archive. The meanings described above are all operative within the Wulz’ artistic trajectory, and it is only by maintaining such semantic and ideological multiplicity that we can fully grasp the intricate web of genealogical, affective, and professional references that the archive simultaneously bears witness to and constitutes.

Wanda and younger sister Marion’s relationship with photography is, from their debut in front of the camera to their long career behind it, a familiar experience. As daughters, they exist within a family genealogy that, from an early age, initiates them into the profession by using them as favoured ‘targets,’ as Barthes put it. As technicians, they soon step behind the camera and take control over a whole technological domain, mastering every step of the photographic process. They confidently take advantage of photography as an epistemological tool that mediates for them the distance between the new and the known, and as an apparatus that allows them to constantly blur the boundaries between the domestic and the professional. As artists, they demonstrate an ease, a playful and often understated originality that puts them at the forefront of the historical experience of photography in Italy.

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