



VERONIQUE  
CHARLOTTE

GENDER IS  
FREEDOM

*Gender Project* is a ten-year social photography project, which aims to break down the boundaries regarding gender identity and highlight the beauty in our differences and diversity. The more we reject and challenge outdated societal norms and constructions the freer we will become. However, unlearning all the things we are taught from an early age, particularly when it comes to gender identity, is not an easy thing to do; but it is something that Italian visual artist and performer Veronique Charlotte wants to help with, via *Gender Project*.

Born from the idea that gender identity is not binary (limited to male or female) but a spectrum, *Gender Project* is an ambitious ten-year social photography endeavour which seeks to create 1000 portraits across 10 global interactive exhibitions in different cities (that's 100 portraits and 100 people per city). The goal? Equality. The project has already been documented and exhibited in London and Milan in its first two years, now in its third year Veronique heads to Berlin where she plans to exhibit in May.



**When did you realise you wanted to pursue photography as a career and why?**

The beginning of *Gender Project* felt like a new beginning for me in the field of photography. I decided to undertake photography to seek the beauty of vulnerability but with a different approach, something much more intimate and conversational.

**What's your personal photography style?**

My work is introspective. It focuses on the body in relation to the social environment and gives shape to the thread of human connection. My approach is experimental and performative, pushing my body and mind to the limit in pursuit of greater clarity and release. My creative and cultural activities are based on the comprehension of gender identity, equality and awareness. This ranges across age, race, and sexuality with my aim to make art as inclusive and accessible as possible for everyone.

**Is there any artist, of any field, that inspires your work?**

The work of many artists gives me constant inspiration. From Nan Goldin's photographs to Lou Reed's song lyrics. But, to be honest, my primary source of inspiration is people. In particular, all of their stories, their dreams and the battles they fight daily which make them unique.

**A lot of artists were hit pretty hard creatively and economically due to last year's lockdown. How did you keep productive and creative throughout it?**

I was working on the second *Gender Project* exhibition in Milan when the first lockdown happened, so I couldn't go back to London for six months. During that time I did a lot of research and as soon as I could, I immersed myself in my work with a different approach linked to restrictions and social distance. It was, for sure, an adventure without precedent, completing an exhibition that brought 7000 visitors during a world pandemic, but my determination and the support of many collaborators, artists and associations made it possible for the second *Gender Project* to succeed. It's in moments of total vulnerability that we are able to bring out our full potential.

**This year marks your third consecutive year of *Gender Project*. Could you tell us what this project is about and why you decided to do it?**

Gender aims to tell 1000 stories through 0100 portraits that narrate the social cross-section of 0010 world capitals, with 0001 only goal: to break down walls and difficulties that prevent us from accepting the differences that make us unique. As a social artist I feel the responsibility to share and talk about modern social problems. With the arrival of new technologies we risk losing face-to-face communication. The world of emotions, feelings and words is a world that doesn't need screens. So this project is a "mark-making" exercise that also explores the collective consciousness of what we are, do and feel. Also, this collection showcases collective memory as an object in flux, which depends on our intervention. The portraits commemorate a multicultural and diverse community that exists at this time, but they also highlight the interdependence of each character in order to create a safe space for this liminality, also underlining the need to continually revisit and observe the demand for identity and representation.

**So, what do both identity and gender mean to you? Have your definitions changed ever since you started the project?**

Gender and identity is who we are and our free decisions, interactions and connections. Connections are related to identity, because similar connections attract and generate mutual inspiration, which gives us the strength to pursue our goals in total fluidity and freedom. To expand our prospects as a spectrum, a range of possibilities, is the acknowledgment of a new set of visible gender identities. In optics, "spectrum" is used to describe the rainbow of colours in visible light after passing through a prism. To summarise, an awakening.



**You take pictures of a hundred people each year for this project. How do you pick the subjects? Is there a specific type of person you look for?**

Gender is a space open to all those who are happy to be part of this journey and to all those who want to share emotions, be open to

discussions and establish connections. Therefore, the project is not based on a casting, but instead it is an open call for the first 100 volunteers.

**There have been many controversies the past few years involving mainly male photographers abusing young models, women and men alike, during shoots. How can we, as people who work in this industry, work towards preventing this?**

My creative process is a visual research into the lives of my subjects through a combination of photoshoot and video interview. Due to the intimate nature of the process and focus on marginalised groups it is essential for me to create a safe space and comfortable environment for them because, as you've probably seen, the subjects in my portraits are mainly naked. Many of the people I photograph are not models and for many of them it is their first time in a studio with a photographer. There are many young people who have a history of abuse and violence behind them and a lot of fragility inside, you can imagine how important it is to empathize.

There is something that we can all do, and that is to make the decision to become better people. If we see that someone is in trouble let's not turn our backs on them, let's not walk close to the problems of others with our eyes closed, let's make ourselves available to listen. I too, was abused when I was very young and in a photographic studio by a male photographer. This is actually the first time that I have said it publicly. I was young, inexperienced and I thought it was part of the game, but obviously it wasn't. There is this sense of shame to be a victim of abuse, you feel dirty and sticky for so long. But then the day comes, when someone opens up and empathizes with you and doesn't make you feel alone anymore. So, let's talk! It would be enough to step back, listen more to those around us, and read between the lines. Also obviously denounce and report any kind of injustice and abuse within their communities and workplaces, because the silence makes you complicit.

**You take an hour to shoot each subject that appears on the exhibition. What happens during that hour?**

The photographs are taken during an intimate one-hour energy exchange, in which the subject and myself voluntarily assume an open and vulnerable position facing each other to discuss our understandings of fluidity and identity. We talk and create a connection that is free from any judgment; this sounds like a small thing but it means a lot. Every hour with every person is different from the other. Also let's not forget that silence can also be conversation.

**Now that you've taken your exhibition to both Milan and London. Which one would you say is the better city and why?**

There is no better city, they are both are different and special because the people there involved in *Gender Project* are unique but all connected. We take the previous edition to the next city, so in Milan you could find the hundred portraits of Londoners and it will be the case in all the stages, up to the final exhibition with all 1000 portraits all together. It is a project that is becoming a movement in its turn, we are growing thanks to the support of many people and thanks to the connections and

interactions that have been created in the last two years. All this helps, consequently, to improve and create new experiences in future exhibitions.

**Why Berlin this year? And which city are you doing afterwards?**

London, Milan and Berlin are three cities to which I am particularly connected to. Berlin is the capital of artists, if you are an artist you have to pass through Berlin and savour the magnetism of this city. The freedom of expression there is unique in the world, and is lived naturally without too many questions asked or prejudices. People from all over the world go and spend even just a weekend there because they are curious to feel something more that they can't find anywhere else. Sexuality is extremely free and natural, as I think it should be everywhere. Berlin's totally open minded view, is sometimes misread as excessive. However, I have not found a better place in the world to photograph this freedom of identity and bring this message to an outside audience. Berlin will be the last European capital for the project and in its conclusion we will present the first book of the *Gender Project* in Berlin. From November 2021 we will head to India, Brazil and Africa to shoot the first colourised collection of 300 portraits. But I don't want to tell you more now, because life is full of surprises. It is important to make plans, but sometimes it is also nice to be overwhelmed by the moment.

**What's been your best or favourite moment since you began the project? A particular memory or shoot?**

Every shoot is memorable, so I have got 200 favourite moments so far.







Works  
Walter Adrián

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