



front cover Birds watch in a bramble 2010

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Studies

Eline Brotherus

ARTEXTBOOK

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reflexive space

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“A GOOD LIFE IS SEEING THE WORLD ESTHETICALLY”

New Photographs (2006-)

My work consists of walking with the camera in a back-pack and the tripod under my arm, observing the changing light, looking for the simple landscape, depicting a human figure in a space without any narrative. The subject matter is the passage of time, the color of light, the human form, the artist's gaze.

Image has its own laws. One looks at an image in a different way than one looks at the real world. When photographing, one often cannot see what the result will be; whereas upon watching a photograph one sees and knows instantaneously if 'yes or no'. Things are found and resolved through working, repeating and going deeper, through variations of a theme.

Everything has to do with the eye. In all my work, in the end, the question is about the artist's gaze that becomes visible in the photograph. The wanderer in front of a landscape shows us what she has chosen to look at. The back of the artist-model is calm. She invites us to watch together with her, but we don't disturb each other. The artist looks at the model with this same gaze: neutral, observing, but at the same time admiring and surprised. In some photographs the lonesome artist-model is accompanied by another figure who watches the same landscape with her. Their eyes are hidden from us, but the object, chosen by their gaze, opens up in front of the spectator.

Even when the artist is not physically present in the photograph, her gaze is in it. The object of her gaze, be it model or landscape, is something the artist has chosen to frame out from the world. The photograph contains this gaze and results from it.

Elina Brotherus, April 2008.

I Juha Sihvola, Researcher in Philosophy, in the seminar 'Taiteen paikka' ('The Place for Art'), Finnish Parliament, 2007.

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ARTIST AND HER MODEL



HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW, 2007



PORTRAIT OF A COUPLE, 2007









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MODEL STUDIES













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ARTIST AND HER MODEL



Fuji-mi 3, 2008







Fuji-mi 4, 2008





FUJI-MI 1, 2008,







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SUITES FRANÇAISES







LE NEW DE MONSIEUR CHEVAL, 1999



BONNE NUIT MON AMOUR, 1999





Content



THE ENCHANTMENT OF REALITY

INTERVIEW FRAGMENT

Kaila: Self-portraits have been very important for you, especially in your earlier production. Why did you decide to start making pictures specifically of yourself?

Brotherus: When I began studying photographic art in 1995, I was still in the middle of my university science studies. I was strongly resistant to investigating my own emotional life. When I finally finished my chemistry Master's dissertation, I guess I was able to give up the scientific-analytical thinking required by that type of work and to concentrate on intuition and looking. This brought about a tremendous burst of creativity in me, especially since I suddenly had some free time, and it is that period that the first works that ended up in exhibitions come from. A lot of old issues came to the surface and I began digging into my own head, my own history.

Kaila: Self-portraits by female artists in particular can, to exaggerate slightly, be said to belong in the category of pictures that 'investigate' representation (Cindy Sherman), or then to the category of portraits that depict the artist's authentic self, as with Helene Scherfbeck's moving paintings from the last half of the 19th and first half of the 20th century. Your series of self-portraits *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe* (1997-1999) are touching in their authenticity, but they also contain more symbolic levels, and also social ones, that are more accessible to the viewer.

Brotherus: They have always been taken when something was actually happening – I haven't reconstructed situations after the event. I made *Wedding Portraits* (1997) when I got married, *Divorce Portrait* (1998) when I got divorced, and *I hate sex*. (1998) when I felt that way. So I wasn't showing various women's roles in 'Sherman-esque' fashion, but living my life and trying to capture something genuine and real about it in the pictures. A crucial factor was a sensitivity for recognising 'decisive moments' and then to react quickly. The camera had to be easily accessible, often I already had it ready on a tripod in the corner of the room. I did make my pictures for the camera too, but the more unforced the photographing became, the more the presence of the camera could be ignored.

Kaila: But when you made these self-portraits, did you have a conscious need to talk authentically about your own private life, or were you trying to some extent to distance yourself from more personal levels related to your self?

Brotherus: I at least hoped that the pictures would rise above the personal level to become universal – over-intimate revelatory art is a bit unpleasant. That's why I tried to keep the form language ascetic and subdued: I didn't want the pictures to scream: "Look, I'm unhappy, have pity on me!" In retrospect, I have actually noticed that I reached for the camera more readily when I was unhappy. I worked the pain into a beautiful object that could be looked at detached from myself, and this consoled me a little. In a way it's banal, but art as though legitimates grief. I think in this way a lot of artists make indecent use of their own unhappy lives as material for their art. And then: I am in no way special, the same things have happened and are happening in my life as in everyone else's: people fall in love and split up, their mothers die. These are archetypal events, and that is why people are able to recognise them, perhaps to identify with them, even if the examples are taken from my own life.

Kaila: Throughout its historical existence, photography has often been viewed via polarised, mutually opposed concepts. By that I mean that people have wanted to see photographs either as natural or as cultural, either as authentic or as staged, and so on. Photographers themselves have also propped up this highly problematic demarcation by making pronouncedly staged-looking pictures or pronouncedly 'authentic' looking pictures. In your production authenticity and placing yourself in front of the camera are intertwined together to the point where, for me, it is no longer relevant to think about this 'either/or question'. In that sense, you have an affinity with Wolfgang Tillmans: for him too, authenticity is carried on in the staged, which in turn carries on as authenticity.

Brotherus: What do you think causes this in my pictures, i.e. this intertwinedness, so that 'authenticity' or 'non- authenticity' are not crucial for the viewer?

Kaila: Maybe the way that you so freely combine various modes of representation within the framework of a single entity. For example, you use both surface-emphasising, 'closed' backgrounds reminiscent of anthropological images (as in *Wedding Portraits*), and three-dimensional-feeling, broader landscape-like backgrounds, with a powerful central perspective (*Suites Françaises 1*, 1999).

Brotherus: I try to avoid mannerisms. A work has to have a certain coherence, but at the same time sufficient variety so that things stay interesting. One thing that appeals to me is the musical form 'theme and variations'. This is quite a common structural solution; the composer composes or takes some already existing subsidiary theme and makes variations on it



Brotherus: The sonata form also has a main theme and a subsidiary theme, which are played first, then comes the development, in which the themes are varied, and in the final recapitulation the themes are reiterated, slightly transformed, but almost the same as in the beginning. I think ‘theme and variations’ is also an excellent form for serial pictorial work. But you have to be careful that the whole thing doesn’t become monotonous. I once made the mistake of constructing an exhibition almost solely out of self-portraits. It created a claustrophobic feeling: wherever I looked, I was staring into my own eyes. After that, I started making landscapes part of my exhibitions, alongside the self-portraits – like commas, or breathing spaces, or windows, so that the viewer would get to rest now and then.

Kaila: So your landscape pictures were kinds of catalysts?

Brotherus: Not exactly, but their significance was and still is more purely visual.

Kaila: What do you mean?

Brotherus: That, apart from the Landscapes and Escapes works (1998-1999), they aren’t about a personal narrative. The fact that I have photographed, for example, in France and Iceland is, of course, in a way a narrative element, “EB was here “, but I haven’t in any way tried to emphasise the place or to give it significance on the basis of geographical location. Conversely, I have been interested in pictorial elements, purely on the basis of visual perception. It has been a relief, something new and fresh. Now that I have been happier, I have been able to concentrate on observing my environment instead of observing myself.

Kaila: Your Suites Françaises 1 landscape pictures are to me more ambiguous and also more symbolic than your earlier works.

Brotherus: They are more geometric, more abstract even, than the preceding works. In addition, they are also surprisingly colourful. In *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe* the palette is very narrow: because the subject matter is heavy, I wanted the pictures to be formally simple. While *Suites Françaises 1* contains pink, orange, violet, cyan. When making it I began to take pleasure in the colours. As regards the symbolicness of the series, because the bridge is a recurring theme, it could, of course, be interpreted symbolically. Nevertheless, I was more interested in it visually.

Kaila: Bridges are generally depicted from the side, along with both banks or their equivalents, and whatever is spanned by the bridge, i.e. the water or something else, is visible. Your bridge pictures are quite different, in them our attention is as though on being on the bridge, and the viewer is left to imagine where it leads.

Brotherus: Yes, my bridges are arcs where you can't see to the other side. It is the same as with a curved hillside, or the horizon, which we cannot see behind because the earth is curved. I am interested in these kinds of views, in kinds of 'edges of the world'. The pictures refer to a space that is beyond the horizon; it is linked with the unknown, with the dream that there is something wonderful over the edge.

Kaila: Many of the *Suites Françaises 1* pictures show abandoned and deserted places. Why?

Brotherus: I wanted to simplify, so I photographed empty, 'breathing-space' views. The world contains so much mess and visual noise – I have tried to mark off the interesting and in some way significant fragments.

Kaila: Your way of emphasising central perspective brings to mind the painters of the High Renaissance. For example, the bridge parapets in your pictures lead the gaze to the picture's vanishing point, in other words they become parts of a geometric illusory construction in the same way as, for example, floor tiles did in the work of so many painters of the 14th and 15th centuries.

Brotherus: All these things – the bridge parapets or paving stones – have been in the landscape as a 'given', i.e. I have hardly 'used' them very consciously, at least not for some theoretical purpose. Admittedly, I have had in mind a whole bunch of old paintings, which frontally portray a deep landscape-like space, in which there is a route for the gaze that goes a long way.

Kaila: In these pictures, in quite a different way than in *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe*, you have based the meanings of your pictures on the aesthetic hierarchy. One example could be *Lyon* (1999), which does not have any kind of traditional photographic narrative related to the subject matter, only a simplified, colour tension. Many of the other *Suites Françaises 1* pictures contain the same kinds of 'painterly' elements – by painterliness here I mean that even though your pictures are figurative, the literally definable subject matter in them – the bridge, house or yard – is not the dominant aspect, rather their central feature is the relationship between light, colour and space, which becomes a partly self-referential and at the same time decorative 'new theme'.



Brotherus: The camera is a marvellous device for aesthetic simplification, also because with a large-format camera you often have to use long exposures, so things are simplified even further. Movements, such as swaying branches or rippling water, are averaged out, and this can give rise to some amazing things. In that sense, the camera can achieve something that cannot be grasped by our ordinary visual perception. I photographed the Suites Françaises 1 series with an old view camera and I frequently worked in the evening or early morning. For example, I exposed the alley of plane trees (Chalon-sur-Saône 6, 1999) for 15 minutes and the red bridge (Lyon, 1999) for about five minutes. A considerable number of people walked across the bridge while I was taking the photograph, but not one of them spent long enough there to leave a trace on the film. In principle, however, they are in the picture, in the same way as the white rectangles in Sugimoto's cinema pictures contain a whole film!

Kaila: So your landscape pictures were kinds of catalysts?

Kaila: The relationship between photography and time is a lot more complicated than is generally thought. All photographs depict duration, i.e. a 'time segment' of a certain length, but instead of showing this duration, photographers generally try to cover it up, so that the pictures would look 'all-at-once', sharp and objective. In this respect 19th-century photographers had enormous and, when we think of them now, interesting, difficulties because of the limitedness of their materials. For example, when Daguerre in 1838 photographed the busiest boulevard in Paris with its horse-drawn carriages and crowds of people through the window of his diorama, the only things that stuck to the photographs were the objects that stayed in one place, and the end result shows a ghostly, totally deserted view of the city, apart from a single isolated male figure – the man having stopped for the time it took to polish his shoes.

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The Enchantment of Reality

Discussion between Elina Brotherus and Jan Kaila, 31.8.2001.

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