

## Elina Brotherus: Reflexive spaces

Timo Valjakka, August 2008

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**Reflexion/Reflection** n. 1. the act of reflecting or the state of being reflected. 2. something reflected or the image so produced, as by a mirror. 3. careful or long consideration or thought. 4. implicit or explicit attribution of discredit or blame. 5. Maths. a transformation in which the direction of one axis is reversed or changes the polarity of one of the variables. 6. Anatomy. the bending back of a structure or part upon itself.

Collins English Dictionary

The eccentric French composer Erik Satie put in precise playing instructions for those who perform his compositions. There were lots of these instructions, and they were far more detailed than the traditional *largos* and *fortissimos*.

Elina Brotherus has dedicated *Large de vue* (Breadth of Vision, 2006) to Erik Satie. *Large de vue* is a 45-part series of photographs, in which pictures she has taken at different times and in different places are interspersed with the instructions that Satie added to his *Aperçus désagréables*, completed in 1912.

In her youth, Brotherus played this piece for four-handed piano with her teacher. Her teacher's poetically free translations of the otherwise rather poetic instructions had stayed in her mind for a long time. Now, Satie's original instructions in French – their meanings ranging from *sufficiently slow* to *real* and *perceptible* – are engraved into the glass covering the photographs.

*Large de vue* is not just exceptional in Brotherus' art, it is also important. This multipart work can be seen as a kind of synthesis, as a summation of what she had done before it, and as a bridge to all that has happened since.

The work intersperses the low and yet lower horizons of *The New Painting* series (2000-04) with the personal, human-relationships themes from her earliest works (1997-99) and the *Model Studies* series begun in 2004. This last-mentioned works later formed the basis for *Etudes d'après modèle, danseurs* (2007), a beautiful set of pictures that Brotherus made in collaboration with dancers from the Opéra national de Paris.

The playing instructions engraved in the framing glass also have their precedents: in the works in the *Suites françaises 1* and *2* series (1999) there appear the yellow Post-It notes that Brotherus used to master the French language word by word when she began alternating between Finland and France.

The prominent role played by words in works that Brotherus has made at different times challenges us to reflect on the contribution that the written language has made to the form taken by her art. She speaks several different languages and makes conscious use both of their phonetic properties and of their cultural connotations. The variably German, French and English titles of her sets of works are not just there by the whim of chance.

Ever since her first works, completed in the mid-1990s, Brotherus has been more interested

in visual art and its fundamentals – light, colour and space – than in the documentary tradition that shoots directly and head on. As an artist she is reflective and circumspect, and has often said that she prefers to take something away from her pictures rather than adding to them.

Even though she enjoys being in Paris and Helsinki, there are no cityscapes in her output. “There is so much stuff in cities that the camera won’t fit in among it all,” she says. “It is impossible to simplify a city so that it would appeal me — unless there happen to be natural phenomena, such as rain, mist or darkness, that reduce the amount of information.”

Brotherus prefers to seek out places where less means more, places that are already simplified, and where slight variations in light, colour and atmosphere are visible. The pictures in *Large de vue* are mostly from the Arctic North or from the shores of the oceans, places where there is a lot of room for light and air.

She very often photographs indoors, in bare apartments apparently intended for temporary stays, filled with the signs of living. Nevertheless, she photographed the Parisian dancers in a brightly lit, white-walled studio, where she could decide on all the details that would be visible in the completed pictures.

Brotherus never individualises her locations. Her art is not about countries or addresses, nor about conceptual landscape art or about the idealised attitude of the urban artist to untouched nature. Her works are largely formal, mirroring the nature of the picture itself while delving into the history of art. But that does not stop them also being psychologically charged and recognisable on an emotional level, reflecting surfaces for states of mind.

In the majority of the pictures in *Large de vue* the sky is clear and full of light, often sparkling prismatically like Satie’s or Debussy’s impressionism. Brotherus is herself present in some of the pictures, sometimes seen from very close to, sometimes in a green raincoat with her back to us, like a sign. This recognisable figure anchors the different parts of the work both in each other and in the rest of her production.

*Large de vue* is not a story, nor do we have to read it like a book, even though Satie’s instructions can be rolled round the tongue like the lines of a poem. Nor is this work a conceptual project intended to measure the distance between word and image, or their ability to alter each other’s tone. “The work is like a series of songs or a book of preludes. Each individual image can be looked at and listened to, we can watch how it glistens, and how it makes the others resonate,” is how Brotherus describes it.

The structure of the work is reminiscent of a flowchart that allows our thoughts to run freely in all directions. It is founded on an inner coherence, on a mental equation that runs through all the individual pictures, one that eludes unequivocal interpretations, but whose presence can be felt. At the same time, the work is a kind of miniature model of Brotherus’ art, in which a piece that has just been finished may open up totally unexpected perspectives on others that were completed years ago.

In 1947, the French writer Raymond Queneau published his marvellous *Exercices de style*<sup>\*</sup>, in which he tells the same brief story in 99 different ways, as though gauging the potential expressive power of language.

As became clear above, seriality and the closely related concept of theme and variation are a fundamental part of Brotherus’ art. When facing one of her works, it is good to bear in mind her interest in the characteristically French tradition of intellectual and linguistic playfulness represented by Satie and Queneau, and why not also by the impressionism that discovered seriality. In contrast, her art should not be confused with the seriality of (Anglo-Saxon)

minimalism and conceptual art, with art that seeks to call concepts of art into question by use of a repetition that alludes to industrial and mechanical processes.

Prior to her multi-part piece, Brotherus worked for a long time on her *The New Painting* series (2000-04), in which she investigated not only her relationship with painting, but also the way a picture generates meanings. Even though the works in the series can bring individual artists to mind, Brotherus has not quoted from recognisable artworks. She has operated on the level of styles and genres.

With *The New Painting*, the autobiographical character of Brotherus' art gave way to visuality, and to an emphasis on the formal properties of the picture. When she appears in her pictures herself, she is just a model, a figure in space, something she also often accentuates by having her back to the viewer, either on her own or with someone else. Sometimes, her shape clad in its long overcoat is reminiscent of the object of identification, the intermediary figure between viewer and landscape, familiar from Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, as, for instance, in the works in her group of pictures *Der Wanderer* (2003-04).

*The New Painting* was followed by *Model Studies* (2004-), a growing series of photographs and video works in which Brotherus has delved ever deeper into the wellsprings of the picture, bringing professional models, people who are used to being the object of the gaze, into her pictures along with herself. These works also interestingly shed light on academic traditions that have long exerted an underlying influence on visual art, both the carefully painted classical nudes and the rapidly sketched *croquis* drawings familiar from art schools. The webs of references have become denser, at the same time as the 'decisive moments' so beloved of photography have expanded from fractions of a second to minutes, hours, and even days.

Just as an unexpected archaeological find can change our conceptions of the past, so Brotherus' recent works open up new viewpoints on her art. It becomes increasingly evident that this is a language built up piece by piece or a constructed space that permits the visual, formal and psychological properties of individual works to be mingled together.

Mirrors and various light-reflecting surfaces recur again and again in Brotherus' works. Often it is the same well-worn mirror or the shiny crystal ball, which alludes to their status as props. Sometimes, it is an open window or the mirror-smooth surface of water, both ideal for opening up the structure of the picture and for creating emotional sensations and impressions.

Even though Brotherus' works that make use of mirrors and reflections have links, for example, with the art of Pierre Bonnard and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and in *Narcisse endormi* (2007) even with Caravaggio, there is more at stake here. For her these art-historical quotations and references are not an end in themselves.

The mirrors and reflective surfaces add further dimensions to the picture space by showing what otherwise would remain inaccessible to the eye. They add to the work's visual interest in a way that is familiar from the classical art of painting, and which cubism and futurism developed to an extreme by showing objects from many different sides at once.

It is, nevertheless, hardly an accident that mirrors seem to be a feature specifically of French painting. The French word for reflection, *réflexion*, and its abundant connotations provides us with an opportunity to compare the spaces and situations depicted by Brotherus to states of mind, memories and dreams. In fact, the mirror first appeared in her art in 1999, in *Le reflet*, a work in the *Suites françaises 2* series. The title is also written on a Post-It note stuck to the mirror that dominates the picture, as though to remind us of the way that the picture and the

word had begun to be intertwined.

In Brotherus' case it is essential to look at her photographs as we would at paintings, as integrated wholes in which everything in them that we can see is also significant. From the mirror that dominates the picture it is a short distance to the idea that the picture itself is a mirror. This idea seems to recur in her art and to be articulated with greater precision on each successive occasion.

It is only a little over ten years since Brotherus' first works associated with personal, often painful memories, which makes the journey that she has taken feel even longer. She has worked her way out of subjectivism, out of a situation in which we look at her, and entered into a situation in which her own already almost anonymous figure has become an object of identification, a mediating element for all of us. Both the mirrors and the reflections, as well as the man standing in the rain (*Man with Umbrella*, 2007), are keys to a reflexive space in which we can recognise ourselves.

Translated from the Finnish by Michael Garner

\* Translated into English as '*Exercises in Style*' by Barbara Wright, 1958.