

On performing for the camera / on standing in front of the camera

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Elina Brotherus relates that people have praised her for being a good actress. Paradoxically she thinks herself that she is a bad actress. The expression "performing" makes most of us think of the theatre or cinema. Far fewer of us think of photographs or the art of photography. The expression "to perform" even has a negative tone in respect of photography. A staged photograph can appear as false or artificial. Walter Benjamin wrote a wonderful text on how the actor's presence is transformed from standing on the stage in front of an audience to "merely" standing in front of the film camera. According to Benjamin the actor's important physical presence is transformed into physical absence in the film. Film 'stars' are born to compensate for this lack and their reputation is often built up with the help of events and phenomena beyond the film itself.

The value and importance of photography has traditionally been based on the explicit presence of something "genuine". True, the history of photography is full of exceptions: there are political propaganda pictures that everyone knows were staged and the early "art films" in which the actors and actresses consciously played different roles. During the 1970s people started talking of "constructed" photographs whose allegorical point of departure was to portray reality as a sort of drama since photographic representation is always steered by specific interests and since there can be no neutral relationship to reality. But to return to Brotherus' pictures: I cannot determine whether Elina Brotherus is a good or a bad actress. Perhaps she is both at the same time... Brotherus has such an exceptional ability to "construct" and to build up her pictures that even if they are entirely staged ("I am doing this just now in front of the camera"), they do not remain on the level of enacted tautology (thus they are not pictures that deal with acting a role even if the people portrayed are performing), they are expanded so that they abruptly refer to something other than what they represent or portray.

How does Brotherus avoid the problems that arise in relation to the above named artificial or inflicted character in the constructed or staged photograph? By starting from phenomena that she knows best, herself. By presenting herself in her pictures as simply and unaffectedly as possible so that she does not "stumble" on anything collectively experienced or preconceived and by portraying that which is totally present to herself just now in this very instant. Yet the milieus that she chooses seem universal and general and this is true too of the props she uses. Brotherus seldom repeats a venue or objects in a picture and in this way her pictures are always both surprising and familiar in an everyday sense, without any definitive symbolic signs or meanings that Brotherus herself has ordained.

I experience Elina Brotherus' landscape pictures in several different ways. It is evident, when one has seen ten or so of the photographs in which she appears herself, that one begins to see her landscape pictures as projections of herself even though she does not appear in them. In other words one begins to reflect on what she may have been doing in these landscapes or the reason why particular landscapes were so important to her that she had to photograph them. Her landscapes are psychologically charged or they are psychologically determined. But this charge is at its strongest when one has seen her self-portraits. If one sees Brotherus' landscapes as a completely separate series, the pictures are strikingly much more eclectic than is usually the case when artists portray landscape in some form or other; something one does not think of in connection with the pictures in which she appears herself since these pictures' built-in power to hypnotize the beholder binds them together into independent sequences. Brotherus' eclecticism I find extremely fascinating. Brotherus constantly challenges her own medium. The richness of her ways of using the camera is reminiscent of the visual richness of the cinema.

The starting point for Brotherus' series *Suites Françaises 2* was her prolonged stay in France, i.e. in a country where one speaks a language foreign to her. I have never formerly seen a work in which someone has, with such clarity, dealt with the problems of linguistic and cultural exclusion. Her naive paper notes in French are like fuses attached to a large bomb. *Suites Françaises 2* is a harrowing and humorous narrative about the importance of the lack of a language and of being present. But the suite is much more than merely a series of linguistic repetitions. The tension between the presence of both image and text at the same time is one of the central problems of twentieth-century art from the collages of Picasso to Joseph Kosuth's conceptual art or Barbara Kruger's and Jenny Holzer's text pictures. Brotherus' text pictures are, however, not rhetorical repetitions building on a rhetoric connected with the criticized relationship between image, text and language. Rather, Brotherus in her suite builds up major theoretical questions while at the same time uncompromisingly keeping to her own autobiographical points of departure (life in France). Thus she deals, in a credible and emotionally convincing manner, even with major theoretical problems such as, for example, the difference between what is named and unnamed or the question of the dramatic, or even humorous, effect of the text fragments in the picture. *Suites Françaises 2* thus starts from a practical level – daily life – and expands into a theoretical reflection. There are few suites of pictures that achieve this.