The Enchantment of Reality

Discussion between Elina Brotherus and Jan Kaila, 31.8.2001.

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Translated from Finnish by Michael Garner.

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. 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: 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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Kaila: It is odd that you were able to work on *Suites Françaises 1* and *2* at the same time. The series are so different. *Suites Françaises 2* is narrative in a more traditional way, while in *Suites Françaises 1* the accent is on aestheticism, which we have already talked about.

Brotherus: *Suites Françaises 2*, in the same way as *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe*, has an autobiographical background, but the series' primary content, with its questions about understanding language, is something else. I see *Suites Françaises 2* as a transition between the old and the new work. If we think of the strongly personal-historical material of the initial phase and my work at the moment, from which autobiographical ingredients have been almost totally eliminated, *Suites Françaises 2* is situated pretty well halfway between. The starting point for the series was certainly my personal situation, when I came to live in France with almost no grasp of the language. But very many people share these experiences with me: being an outsider, terrible loneliness, and the way that everyday communication is difficult, never mind any deeper exchange of ideas. As a survival strategy people try to bring order to the conceptual chaos by naming things and through that taking control of their environment and their life. In my case, it was a question of a double taking of control – taking photographs is also, like naming things, a way of taking control of the world.

Kaila: *Suites Françaises 2* is definitely your most political work. The world, with its vast currents of refugees and migrations, is increasingly a place where people who speak the language of the place where they live are in a privileged position. *Suites Françaises 2* is also an interesting series in the sense that it also deals with universal questions related to human culture, such as the relationship between language and various entities, and the relationship between picture and text. You show side by side, on the same picture surface, two different possibilities for forming an image of 'reality': through a picture or through a word, and you thus at least touch on numerous dramatic questions, such as, for example, the question associated with art and philosophy about the existence or impossibility of purely visual non-verbal perception. In other words, *Suites Françaises 2* contains ambiguous conceptual levels, all of which are linked to the question of how meanings are formed overall.

Brotherus: It is interesting, in retrospect, to consider these various levels of meaning. But, I want to stress that when I am photographing I am quite untheoretical: I trust my eyes and my intuition.

Kaila: The way that you have started off from your own everyday life and through that come to open up the conceptual levels that I described before, is in my mind an indication of the tangibility and functionality of your visual-art work. Your own everyday life is presumably also linked with the more playful, even more humorous, content at the end of the *Suites Françaises 2* series. So you learned to speak French?

Brotherus: Well, increasingly. In fact, it has worked out that since the autumn of 1999 I have spent the greater part of my time in France.

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Kaila: The name of your most recent series of works, begun in 2000, is *The New Painting*. Why?

Brotherus: The photographing of this series began in the summer of 2000 in Iceland, where I had an exhibition at that time. The gallerist Edda Jonsdottír said one evening that for her "Photography is the new painting", by which she meant that many photographers today deal with the same problems that painters have dealt with in their own time, for centuries. I thought this was quite an apt and at the same time slightly provocative assertion, which I took up immediately and adopted as the working title for my new series. *The New Painting* includes landscapes, and then pictures in which there appear one or more human figures. But the way of portraying the human being, especially myself, is completely different from the self-portraits in *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe*. I now use the human figure as a model in the same way as a painter might use it; as an object in space, which can above all be investigated formally in relation to light and space. *The New Painting* investigates basic visual concerns, and it doesn't really have any other theme.

Kaila: We did touch on the presence of an aesthetic hierarchy and of painterliness in your works when we talked about your *Suites Françaises 1* landscape series. But in these *The New Painting* landscapes you go a step further in terms of these levels. You have called into question the central-perspective character of the camera by primarily situating the landscapes in your pictures as horizontal geometrical surfaces – the orthogonal diagonals that emphasised the depth of the space in your earlier landscapes have now gone. In other words, when looking at these new landscapes, we no longer really form an image of in what depth relation to each other the photographed objects are situated, and it follows from this that the pictures' topologically generated narrative in the style of "there is a stone, and behind it is a valley." gives way to a purer visuality, i.e. to colour, light and form. If we then think of the basic quality of your and many other photographers' pictures as a possible new form of painting, it, of course, occurs to us to ask whether photography is an area where there are sufficient topics of discussion related to pure visuality and aesthetically rooted ways of working in general. Many people are of the opinion that corresponding questions were drained to the dregs with modernism in painting.

Brotherus: I think photography nevertheless differs crucially from modernist painting in the way that a photograph never totally gets away from its subject matter. Even though my horizon works become more abstract the lower the horizon drops, they are still always in the end traces left on film by a real landscape. The landscapes in *The New Painting* series reflect more of a dream of simplification than a need for abstraction. I want pictures that have been stripped of everything superfluous. Simplification is also linked with the need of people who live in cities for a wide, calming space made up of a few lines, not just as a picture, but also as a place and as a real landscape where they can breathe and gaze as far as the eye can see.

Kaila: But what do you think of the relationship between your Iceland pictures and postcard and calendar pictures? You have to an extent photographed exactly the same kinds of places as they have.

Brotherus: With landscapes I always end up thinking: what makes my works 'art' and distinguishes them from postcards and travel adverts. If my pictures were taken out of the art reference frame, what would happen then? I don't have a single, unambiguous answer to that. Perhaps one criterion is quality: by that I mean the professional skill that comes from training, the use of big equipment, making good prints – in other words control of the entire picture-making process, with all its strict selection processes.

Kaila: Let's go back once again to the relationship between photography and painting in your works. You have titled some of the pictures in *The New Painting* series, which contain human figures, after well-known paintings, for example, *Les Baigneurs*, i.e. the bathers (2000) or *Femme à sa toilette*, i.e. woman washing (2001). This very obvious situation of yourself in the tradition has the positive effect that the viewer does not have to wonder needlessly whether or not your photographs are reminiscent of some well-known painting, but can calmly switch to thinking about more interesting questions linked to your works, such as how they differ from the paintings of the same name. What is also interesting is that even though you accentuate the importance of the figure in these works to the point of sculpturality, they still have a powerful feel of the everyday and the familiar.

Brotherus: When the starting point is a real environment, the enchantment of reality is present.