

Elina Brotherus: Breadth of Vision

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Azzez lent, Mieux, Avec plaisir, Particulièrement, Beaucoup, Encore, Voyez, Large de vue...

The eccentric French composer Eric Satie wrote precise playing instructions for those performing his compositions. There were lots of these instructions and they were far more detailed than the traditional Italian *largos* and *fortissimos*.

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

In her younger days, Brotherus played this piano duet by Satie together with her teacher. The teacher's lyrically loose translations of the otherwise (already) poetic-sounding instructions have long stayed in her mind. Satie's original instructions from *sufficiently slow to real* and *perceptible* are now engraved into the glass covering the photographs.

"I may perhaps be making an important work," Brotherus says in a text message sent from her studio. This multipart work, which is exceptional for its artist, appears to grow into a synthesis of a large part of all that she has managed to do up to the present.

The work interleaves the low and even lower horizons of *The New Painting* series (2000-04) with the themes of love and human relationships of the self-portraits of her early works (1997-99). Meanwhile, some of the pictures are linked with the *Points of View on Landscape* diptychs (2006-) that emerged alongside this work. Satie's French instructions engraved into the glass of the frame also have their precedents: in the works in the *Suites françaises 1* series (1999) there appear yellow Post-It notes that Brotherus used to master the French language word by word.

Even though Brotherus enjoys being in Paris and Helsinki, she never depicts cities. "In cities there is so much stuff that the camera won't fit in among it all," she says. "It is impossible to simplify a city so that it would please me – unless there happen to be natural phenomena such as rain, mist or darkness to reduce the amount of information."

Brotherus has always been interested in the fundamentals of visual art, in light, colour and space. She appears to be finding her way to places that are as though already simplified and where small differences in light, colour and atmosphere can grow to have great meaning. The pictures in *Large de vue* are largely from the arctic regions of the north or the shores of the oceans, from places where light and air have a lot of space.

Brotherus does not, however, particularise her scenes. Even though the works in the *Points of View on Landscape* series can be reminiscent of British conceptual landscape art and, for example, Hamish Fulton's works, her art is not about moving around in untouched nature. Her pictures are evidently more formal, delving into the essence of the picture. Added to that, they are psychologically charged and recognisable on the level of emotion.

The majority of the pictures in *Large de vue* have a lot of sky and bright light, often glitteringly prismatic like Satie's impressionism. Brotherus is herself present in a few of the pictures, sometimes seen from quite close to, sometimes in a raincoat and seen from behind like a symbol. The familiar figure anchors the work both in the reality of the images and in her previous production.

Large de vue is not a story, nor do we need to read it like a book, from left to right, even though Satie's instructions can also be read as a narrative. Nor is the work a conceptual project that gauges the ability of the image and the word to give each other colour. "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 the gaze to move freely in all directions. It is founded on an inner cohesion, individual pictures combine a mental clue that eschews words and interpretations, but whose presence can be sensed.

In 1947, the French writer Raymond Queneau published a marvellous work *Exercises de style* (English translation, Barbara Wright. 1958), in which he tells the same brief story in 99 different ways. Brotherus has read the book both in the original language and in Finnish.

Seriality and the closely related themes and variations are a fundamental part of Brotherus' art. When faced with one of her works, it is good to bear in mind her interest in the characteristically French tradition of intellectual playfulness represented by Satie and Queneau, as distinct, for example, from minimalism's and conceptual art's way of calling the concept of art into question using repetition that alludes to industrial and mechanical processes.

Prior to this piece, Brotherus worked for a long time on her *The New Painting* series (2000-04), which grew to be important, 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 may bring individual artists to mind, Brotherus has rarely borrowed from individual, recognisable artworks. Rather, she has operated on the level of art genres.

As the series has progressed, the autobiographical has given way to the visual, and to an emphasis on light, colour, space and form. When Brotherus herself appears in the pictures, she is just a model. Also, she often has her back to the viewer, alone or with someone else. She is the intermediary figure between the viewer and the landscape familiar from Caspar David Friedrich's paintings (the *Der Wanderer* group from 2003-04 or *Deux personnages au bord de la mer*, 2005).

A distinct whole is formed by the photographs and videos in the *Model Studies* series (2004-), in which Brotherus delves deeper into the wellsprings of visual art and also partly uses professional models. The series also raises to the light the hundreds-of-years-old academic traditions that underlie visual art, such as the *croquis* drawings done in art schools. The web of references becomes dense, at the same time as the 'decisive moment' so beloved of photography grows from a fraction of a second to last minutes, hours, or even days.