

## Empty Hands

Published in the exhibition catalogue of i8 Galleri, Reykjavik, and Galerie Anhava, Helsinki, 2000.

Caryn Faure Walker

As a Spectator I was interested in photography  
only for sentimental reasons; I wanted to explore  
it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound:  
I see, I feel, hence, I notice, I observe, and  
I think.

Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida [1]

*This is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life* [2]. It is day or early evening sometime in 1998. A solitary young woman (the twenty-six year old, Finnish artist, Elina Brotherus ), in front of the camera, is in control of the shutter release button. The mechanism's cord is just visible in the framed image about to be taken. She sits without ceremony on a bed covered with rumpled sheets. This bed is the room's only furniture. In the photographs about to be taken it will be a 'world' on which, she will eat, smoke, listen to music, cry, embrace.

Two years later, she will (frequently) be absent from these images, but still in control of the camera. She now records the city and countryside with a similar intensity. A new territory and a strange language are as seductively baffling to her as her own reality.

The two major series of photographs by Elina Brotherus: *Landscapes and Escapes* (1998-1999) and *Suites Francaises 1* (1999) presented in two exhibitions at Galleri i8, Reykjavik and at Galerie Anhava, Helsinki, are immediately recognisable as portraits and landscapes. When we react to them displayed together, we not only come closer to knowing unguarded human presence, we watch this presence "tint the landscape, give it an imaginary shade of tone it wouldn't have on its own." [3]

During her training as a photographer at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki, UIAH (1995 to 1998), Brotherus also became a Master of Science in analytic chemistry. Now a scientist of the imagination, Brotherus watches closely as she sets about necessary, if unpredictable, experiments. The material she experiments with is life. Walking, doing, thinking, being reflective or immersed in events, she is at one and the same time, in the middle of, and at one remove from her material, framing experience as a photograph.

This hunting with a camera is an important part of the practice of a documentary photographer as Brotherus defines it: " I think that documentary is striving [to tell] some kind of truths and so am I; also I most often work in/with existing conditions like available light and the objects that happen to be there... Photographing when something really happens... It means looking for my "decisive moments", being sensitive and rapid when the dense moment is there." [4]

By linking documentary photography with direct accumulation of experience, Brotherus insists on the camera operator's and the spectator's simultaneity of participation. Because of this approach, her body of photographs is at once overtly similar to Anglo-American, staged photography of the 1980s and lifestyle photography of the 1990s. Both areas of image making have been heavily influenced by film stills, "real people" advertisements, and

confessional T.V. programmes. But Brotherus' body of photographs is also dissimilar to these trends and more intimately at home in another ambience.

Curator and writer, Marietta Jaukkuri, has coincidentally located this other place for Brotherus' photography in her separate, unrelated, discussion of the philosopher Husserl's notion of *Lebenswelt* or "life-world". [5] This notion identifies our ability to sense everyday detail as the rich soil of experience-before-concepts, from which we can choose to build towards the already known. Brotherus' photographic practise is a search for this yet-to-be-categorised.

Roland Barthes in the above quotation, more directly identifies this search as a desire to feel, observe and think which the photograph animates. Later in *Camera Lucida* the author is more specific about how the image and the spectator interact in this way. Here Barthes identifies two elements of the photographic image. The first he calls the *studium*. In the photograph this is a visual field of information -a scene- which arouses general human interest. So being it is understood through a filter or "rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture." [6]

The second element he calls the *punctum*: "...it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points... A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." [7]

Looking to photographs in the present exhibitions, I feel the effect of their *punctum* first through a tension created by ambiguity. *Epilogue* (1999), a large, chromogenic colour print on Fujicolour Chrystal Archive paper, mounted on aluminium, is an image of Brotherus. Her bare shoulders visible, she faces the camera in tears; black gloved hands cup her head. The photograph mixes beauty and violence. There is the tremulous, controlled return of gaze by the female subject; the regal, soft, blue garment worn by the anonymous sitter; the velvety light which comes off skin and gloves. There is physical restraint.

In *Epilogue*, Brotherus selects these incongruous details in order that the photographic image reaches beyond its existence as a record of action to become instead a narrative which has duration but not conclusion.

We are left to wonder how to manage in the open parentheses of such images. This is also so of the images she has called "empty landscapes", particularly in *Landscapes and Escapes VI* (a diptych in a series of six works made between 1998 and 1999). In each of these images, a wooden pier traces the division between water and sky. Practically identical in construction, the two can be seen on closer inspection to be different structures. Nonetheless, the images equivocate to tease the eye - at one moment a way out. At another, they appear as a barrier.

The bridge as a signifier recurs not only in *Landscapes and Escapes* but in the exhibition's most recent series, *Suites Francaises 1*. In *Chalon-sur-Saone 2* and *3* (both 1999), Brotherus photographs a bridge so that its path splays open towards the spectator (as it does in *Lyon* (1999)). In *Marseilles* (1999), her camera picks out another urban structure, a roundabout with black and white ground tiles, allowing them to settle in checkerboard, then distort and scatter. *Strasbourg* (1999), a work made in the same year, carries Brotherus interest in the optical and symbolic nature of pattern to a further level of sophistication and into her continuing series of self-portraits. In this she sits in a lotus position on the bed, back to camera. Statuesque, she might be a contemporary figure who invites comparison with

females subjects by the 18th century French painter Ingres. The busy brick, turquoise and beige abstract pattern on the mass produced bed cover in this photograph calls attention to the female subject's stillness. The world outside, the temporary and changing, a fugitive from this quiet is glimpsed as patch of sunburn which has drawn its own design on the sitter's neck. There is a certain pleasure at noticing how time, fixed by an image, appears to speed and slow.

Elina Brotherus said to me the other day: "Light makes a photograph." Does she mean natural light? Or the ability of the photographer to use to penetrate shadow's meaning? Night has recently appeared as a subject in Brotherus' photographs. In the darkness, she is there. She waits: being this, being thus, being so. She self-possessed, her imagination full. Hands empty at her sides.

Caryn Faure Walker

London 2000

#### Footnotes

[1] Barthes, Roland, Camera Lucida, London, England, Vintage Books, 1993, page 21.

[2] The title of a triptych made by Brotherus in 1998, chromogenic colour print on Fujicolour Crystal Archive paper.

[3] From unpublished e-mail sent to author, February, 2000-06-19

[4] Ibid.

[5] Jaakkuri, Maaretta, "From the Everyday to Art, and Back", Interpreting Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland, The Finnish National Gallery, Annual publication, Ateneum, 1998

[6] Barthes, op cit.

[7] Ibid.