

What I look at is never what I wish to see

- by Stine Ofelia K.

INDEX:

- INTRO
- I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A ~~MAN~~ PAINTER
- (A WAY OF WORKING)
- TOUCHED
- AFFECTED BY YOU
- (B WAY OF WORKING)
- REALITY IS A DISCUSSED MATTER
- WHAT I LOOK AT IS NEVER WHAT I WISH TO SEE
- (A LATE FRIENDLY TALK ABOUT THE SHOW "ME, MYSELF AND I")
- REFERENCES

*"In vain your image comes to meet me
And does not enter me where I am who only shows it
Turning towards me you can find
On the wall of my gaze only your dreamt-of-shadow.*

*I am that wretch comparable with mirrors
That can reflect but cannot see
Like them my eye is empty and like them inhabited
By your absence which makes them blind."*

(Aragon in Lacan 1981:17)

INTRO:

For many years I tried to avoid categorization. I thought of being seen as a way of reducing my freedom: freedom to act, talk and work without automatically identifying with some predefined images. It is just recently that it became clear to me how impossible that 'staying out and being free' project is. As Claude Levi-Strauss claims, the basis of human culture is identifying with one group, then, abandoning that group to identify with another (Cf. Levi-Strauss 1970). A pattern of going in and out of meetings with other people; a way to meet oneself. And talking about the self, maybe my endless fight against categorization is merely the result of what I saw when I, for the first time, recognized my own image in the mirror. As Jacques-Marie-Émile Lacan puts it: alienation! A theory that continues with the child starting to identify with the mirrored image while, nevertheless, experiencing an extremely different reality (Cf. Lacan 2001:1-8). If that is the starting point of any human ego, as Lacan suggests, it sheds light on my childish attempt of avoiding all categorization.

To meet myself while meeting other people is indeed an important part of my art practice, but to stay alone in the place where I feel most relaxed -and that is away from any gaze but my own- is yet an equally important way for me to work. Lacan claims that God is unconscious, as is language, which determines subjectivity (Cf. Lacan 1981). And Judith Butler follows up writing about how the sexes determinate bodily experiences (Cf. Butler 1993:1-23).

Now, as a human being, as a woman, and as a white, Scandinavian artist, my desire is to throw light on social structures and especially the structures of subjectivity.

In other words my focus is the human condition with the underlining question being: in which structures are human beings caught while they like to talk as if they are in fully control?

How can I work with that tension artistically?

"A Holy Madness: She and He"
(Kristeva 1987:83)

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A ~~MAN~~ PAINTER:

To be an artist of today where both men and women are allowed into the academies is, indeed, a challenge. There is no doubt in my mind that to be an artist is sometimes to be identified as mythical. To be an artist is to be in a position with a long tradition of defined identification and I find it hard to believe that any student entering an academy can create¹ without in one way or another relating to the conception of the artist, be that acceptance, rejection or otherwise. For many days I cried in my studio. I stayed alone, not eating or sleeping, and I desired nothing but to become exactly that: the artist. Unfortunately every time I looked in the mirror I could not see myself as such since in my eyes the artist was, still, a painter. A male painter.

According to Roland Barthes the author died in 1951 (Cf. Barthes 1990:142-148). And continuing along the concept-defying path outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the introduction of “A Thousand Plateaus” any rooted, centre based identification should have been abandoned years ago (Cf. Deleuze and Guattari 2004:3-25). The artist is in and out of focus and the artworks are floating among all kinds of things with no defined value but the one made in relation to any other existing thing. Why am I still looking for the reflection I cannot find?

The mythical identification of the artist has, indeed, changed over time. From the God-given special gift, which could transform the canvas to a sublime artwork only through the artist's hand to another kind of holiness transforming paint into holy liquid.

Nevertheless, I see him very clearly: alone in his studio from which his female model just left, and he almost mistakes the action of painting with the action of fucking (or is it masturbating?).

And he looks happy –even if painting is a real struggle- and it all makes sense (both to him now, and later on to a specific buyer and the art market in general). Well, today's myth is told a little differently, even if the echo of the old one is still heard very clearly. This is also a central issue in the work of Paul McCarthy, as expressed in his video “Painter”, in which he “(...) seeks to undermine the idea of ‘the myth of artistic

¹ What if I had chosen the word “produce” or “construct” instead of “create”- what difference would that have made for this text?

greatness' and attacks the perception of the heroic male artist" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_McCarthy April 15th). Today I imagine that the myth of the artist also includes being flexible, mobile and very home-based in at least one art scene at the same time. Myths!

However, Paul McCarthy is an American man and I am a Danish woman so are we really talking about the same? It was only six months ago that I read an article quoting an English contemporary-art critic saying that the reason why paintings by female artists are not sold for anywhere near the same amount of money as paintings made by different male painters, is that women simply cannot attain the sublime (Cf. Johnson: 2008). Clearly, I am not talking about national differences here, but I do live and work in a very specific context: the Danish art world with its great contemporary artists, always presented as Olafur Eliasson (and he is actually Icelandic), Tal R, Christian Von Hornslet, Marco Evaristti and a few others- but hey, where are the women? Are they still modelling in the studios of these men?

Of course there are female Danish artists, and also some who make a living out of their work, but what I'm saying is that it is very rare to see female artists representing the Danish art scene in the newspapers, in television or elsewhere in the popular public sphere.

The representation issues are of great importance since knowledge marks possible identification. If female artists are not represented, I will get no knowledge about them and who am I, then, to identify with? Female artists living outside of Denmark – but why then live in Denmark? Or the group referred to as the great contemporary Danish artists, and ignore the fact that I am a woman?

Basically, I do not see gender as something necessary to underline, but with the almost total absence of female representation it becomes an extremely important issue. (Here I should thank this school for educating a relatively large group of female Danish artists –hopefully they will change the list of contemporary Danish artists in the popular public sphere).

Before I go on, allow me to express my gratitude for the great works by female artists, whether represented in the media or not. And let me also thank female theorists, like Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva, for clarifying the historical and the current position of women. A position in which women are part of the creating, which means that they can make changes by themselves, instead of waiting/begging/screaming/threatening/crying/whatever for men to do that (for them).

Kristeva does something that I find amazing in the chapter entitled “Stabat Mater” in her book “Tales of Love”. By analysing how the female ideal is linked to the image of the Virgin Mary she explains not only gendered power structures at a social level, but also on a subjective level (Cf. Kristeva 1987:234-263). Identification is, of course, a social issue, but nevertheless a mentally construction as well. As I have already said, knowledge marks possible identification, and as far as Virgin Mary is the ultimate ideal of female identification it might be hard to be a female artist –and much easier to be a model for the male artist. Of course there is female power gained by the identification with the Virgin Mary but she was not, and will not be, a producing artist. Therefore, she is, at least, standing in my way.

In my work *I've always wanted to be a ~~man~~ painter* I pay a male Danish art student to perform a painting in the gallery space of my show. My motivation for doing so is my desire to overcome the alienation of what I am, and what think I am supposed to be, if I am to identify unproblematic with the term “artist”.

Yet, another more specific motivation for this work relates to the concept of “the gaze”.

A man I try to escape from, a man I try to ignore -though I have already mentioned him- is the French thinker Jacques-Marie-Émile Lacan. For several reasons – most of them clearly unconscious- I try hard to avoid his name, but I nevertheless end up referring to him. I try to avoid his gaze but keep feeling seen –even when, with much effort, I turn myself into a painting.

The concept of the gaze is of high importance when talking about subjectivity in an art context. A popular way of talking about the motivation for an artist to work is to say that the artist wants to be seen. I would rather say that to be seen is what any

subject desires. An artist might work on the basis of another motivation (as well), and what the viewer might do when looking at an artwork is not to see the artist who made it but to avoid “the gaze”.

Lacan divides the eye from the gaze. On one hand there is the function of the eye, and on the other hand there is the gaze. Confronted with a painting the I -who now is the viewer- gains peace from the gaze: “He [the painter] gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons. This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the *laying down*, of the gaze.” (Lacan 1981:101).

Here it is specifically painting that Lacan talks about but the question of the relationship between other art forms and the gaze is left untouched. Nevertheless, I find the statement interesting and wonder what will happen once a painter is to paint an image I have chosen.

"I'm not happy being a feminist. It should all be over by now."
-Tracy Emin²

(A WAY OF WORKING):

X: “You say that, basically, gender is not of such importance as to underline it and yet you work with gender issues. Can you explain that?”

S: “Hmm. What I mean is that I don’t find any predefined category all that interesting. I mean the content. For me it’s the process of making that requires my attention. And, of course, that the categories have the same level of freedom, rights and privileges. Actually, I often feel that the problem is that everybody seems to have agreed on certain different needs, desires and functions for each of the sexes. I mean, is masculine sexuality really that different from female sexuality? Do men need more

² www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=395

freedom than women, and so on— endlessly, it seems. I agree with Tracy: it should all have been over by now.”

X: “You say that working at home is a way of avoiding the gaze. How is that important for your practice?”

S: “Actually, that is not the case: working at home I focus on the gaze- the one I imagine and feel controlled by. As Lacan says, I’m a stranger to myself in the same sense that others are. Working at home I put my attention towards myself. I try to meet myself and on that platform I work. Do you know what some Buddhists say? They say that you’re in opposition to yourself since you’re never the same as you just were. I find that extremely interesting.”

X: “Does that mean that you don’t take yourself for granted?”

S: “How could I?”

*“(…) writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin.”
(Barthes 1990:142)*

TOUCHED:

In the beginning of this text I mentioned the child recognizing itself in the mirror, which is also called “The mirror stage”. Two important things to remember are that the mirror stage is not just a moment in one’s childhood but a permanent structure of subjectivity, which means that all of us live with the contradiction of what is being seen and what is being experienced: the unavoidable alienation. This is where the ego is constituted: in the Imaginary. Another important thing to remember is that according to Lacan the alienation raises (or gives space to) desire. Since the child is still dependent on the mother, it is first of all the mother whom the child sees as the other³: what the child desires and whose desire the child wants to fulfil. As we all know, no child fulfils the mother’s desires alone and so the child comes to understand —of course not rationally or consciously- that desire is never fulfilled (Cf. Lacan 2001:1-8).

³ Lacan talks about two kinds of other: “The big O” and “the small o”. For reasons of focus, I have chosen not to go into this but to simply talk about the other.

From this three things are stated:

1. Human egos are constituted in an imaginary process.
2. Human desires are always towards the other.
3. Human desire cannot be fulfilled.

Desire and a certain response to the desire is what the child wants. This means that desire is strongly connected to specific expectations of behaviour from the other.

As already mentioned, Lacan claims that the mirror stage is not just a moment in ones childhood but an ongoing way of structuring subjectivity (ibid). Bringing that up to general human life it becomes the way a subject meets and sees the world (what one thinks of as reality). What the subject desires is not determined by the subject but is what determines the subject. In other words, what the subject wants is out of ones reach but entirely dependent on imagination about the other, the gaze, indeed.

In my work *Touched* I have written a set of texts, which are all about the relationship between an “I” and a “You”. The “I” is the speaking character throughout the 60 pages where the continuity of the “You” is less defined. Since the set of texts is about experiences, and there is only one defined character through which the reader gets access to those experiences, the writing opens up for questioning the nature of reality. One might end up asking if it is a story or more of a portrait. Briefly, the attempt is to write about possible identification made in relationships where desire and the other are kept as central imaginary points.

Another way of talking about *Touched* is to go back to the term “myth”. A man who used his life studying myths was the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. He found that it is the structure of a myth that distinguishes the myth from what he calls “logic and science”. To tell a myth or to say something logical and scientific is not just a matter of choosing words but a matter of structure. For Levi-Strauss the meaning of the myth is its capacity to tell something paradoxically in one single story: a narrative structure that overcomes the binary oppositions upon which culture is based (Cf. Levi-Strauss 1970).

One extremely important element of a myth is repetition. It is through repetition that a myth is created layer by layer, which creates a different sense of time than in a logical telling. Where the logical, scientific narrative is linear in time⁴, the myth is spiral-wise⁵. Through repetition it grows and unfolds while it is told when on a structural level not much seems to happen (ibid). From my work *Touched*:

We met upstairs.

It was a Friday night at the end of May. I had just ended an affair and I needed something else to think about, so I passed my door and continued upstairs, hoping to be invited into a life which was not my own.

Our first exchange of words was about images as promotion.

I stood in front of you defending photographs as a useful way of getting attention, while you were sitting on a chair defending music as sellable on its own.

You found my point superficial and I started to feel safe around you.

*

I thought that I saw you.

Even when you told me that I was not seeing you, I thought that I was.

I thought that you were the one not seeing yourself and that I could change that.

You rejected that.

As did I.

*

⁴ Just think of a traditional Western history text.

⁵ And therefore a lot of groups of people are said not to have a history since they have not written it down in a linear manner.

We were lying on top of each other.

On my old wooden floor we finally found the courage to let our bodies touch.

Relaxed and united until you said: "You are so beautiful."

I pushed you away: "How did you dare objectifying me."

*

We wanted to get closer.

We wanted to get closer to life itself and we used all our energy searching for ways to do that.

We thought that life was all about breaking down barriers in order to get space and avoid categorization.

We rejected fitting in.

We wanted to get closer while we were losing our capacity to stay close.

*

Sitting in the car I felt happy. Wishing nothing more from life than the two of us focusing on the same streets, cities, landscapes, people, children, rivers, animals, whatever, passing by.

Sitting in the car next to you, I quietly wished for death to come, knowing that I would die peacefully.

Had we never left that car.

*

For years I dreamt of you.

And I knew you before I met you: the man I wanted to sleep with.

My love.

*

We met in a reconstruction of solitude.

Formulating our histories and spending hours sitting on benches throughout the city, sharing our pasts with each other.

We followed each other all the way from birth into violations and (on good days) out again. Fighting for what we thought of as sanity and justice.

We met insisting that an adult should have been braver than either of us.

*

I imagined that it was the last time I came.

You had broken up with me and I came to you wanting to liberate my desires.

I imagined that if I showed myself as a liberated lover, we would become lovers again.

I left thinking that I was a woman with a fucking good imagination.

(Stine Ofelia K. 2009)

AFFECTED BY YOU:

The work *Touched* was first of all meant to become a book, but confronted with a rather large gallery space I asked myself whether this piece could work in any other form. Going back to my desire to identify as a contemporary artist, I found that I had a chance to try something out that I had wished to try for a long time. In the process I changed the title to *Affected by You*.

In the beginning of this text I mentioned “The Death of the Author” written by Roland Barthes back in 1951. In the essay Barthes claims that by writing the author dies, since it is not the author speaking through language but language speaking through the author (Cf. Barthes 1990:142-143). Barthes continues: “For him [the writer], on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.” (Ibid:146). The conclusion of this thought is that the author can only imitate something antecedent and never be original. A thought that ends by the writer refusing God and what Barthes names “God’s hypostases”: reason, science and law (ibid:147).

Now, the death of the author is the birth of the reader. That is the change of focus that Barthes makes when he claims: “(...) a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.” (Ibid:148). So if the author is dead and the reader is the only point of unity that a text has, how could I install my writing while not only considering the reader’s imaginary order but also their bodies? How could I physically rewrite my work?

My answer was to handwrite the entire set of texts on the floor in a sixty square meter big white room. Above the writing I put broken crystal glass since it is the material by which the text would have been written if it was written by a material. Glass is complex; it is hard and vulnerable, beautiful and hurtful, heavy in weight and light in appearance. To choose crystal glass is to underline the pureness of the material; no other kind of glass reflects light so intensely.

*“Reality is marginal”
(Lacan 1981:108)*

REALITY IS A DISCUSSED MATTER:

Continuing inside the gallery space, I show the video-based piece *Reality is a Discussed Matter*. Using Lacan's statement "Reality is marginal" as a starting point, I went out to film by night. What I found was that darkness is the optimal time and place for clarifying the imagination. It is when not really seeing that I start to see what I expect to see- being what I wish for or what I fear. In that way nightly darkness becomes a self-confronting time and place.

In the book "Das Unheimliche" (English title "The Uncanny") from 1919 Freud writes about the origin of the word "Unheimliche" which in English literally means "un-homely". The central thought of the book is that the uncanny is closely linked to homely. It is when feeling home and safe that the uncanny can appear with greatest intensity (Freud 1998). This is a thought I used when choosing locations for my filming. Without thinking concretely about Freud and his work around the uncanny, I went to my mothers place and used that as a starting point. A small city in the heart of Denmark where the surfaces look nice- buildings, houses, gardens, streets, cars, all sort of things- but also where, statistically, a great percentage of violence takes place.

To base a work on darkness might also be seen in terms of the processes of subjectivity, since it is generally said that the shadow of the subject is what is out of reach for that very subject; the unconscious hidden by repression.

(B WAY OF WORKING):

X: "What do you mean by having two ways of working?"

S: "I properly have more than two ways of working, but okay, let's say two. Well, actually it's about focus and attention."

X: "And control?"

S: "Well, yes, also control. Hmm. Susan Hiller uses a concept, which she calls "The Meeting" –well, all anthropologists' do- and I've been thinking about that in relation to my practice and the term "control". Actually, it's very simple; I get an idea according to the circumstances I'm in. Then, I work on a concept, do research, apply for funding, and get the materials needed and so forth. All that kind of work I like to

think of as constructing a space or a frame where I'm in control. Then, mostly at the moment of realizing the work, that tiny moment of meeting reality, or making it real, I let go. According to the specific piece of work, that meeting is different; it can be the moment the camera faces the model in circumstances that I have created, the moment I let go of the dye in a waterfall, or what performers will actually do once they perform my instructions. In that way I'm in control during the entire process but at the moment of the actual making or making reality, I let go. In that way I'm never alone with or in my work since the moment of meeting always includes other people: models, photographers, performers and so on."

X: "Does that mean that the result might end up bad or a mistake?"

S: "Surely, that's part of the deal working like I do. In the end; what's good and what's bad? What is a success and what is a failure? Who is in a position to judge – apart from money on the market? No, simply; it's my way of having fun and I certainly think that that is needed for an artist."

*"What I look at is never what I wish to see."
(Lacan 1981:103)*

WHAT I LOOK AT IS NEVER WHAT I WISH TO SEE:

To round up –both this writing and six years as a student at Malmö Art Academy- I find myself with key concepts such as gender, the gaze, the author, the self, the text(s) and the imaginary. All of which are issues dealing with identification and representation.

I started my art career doing photography and especially photographic portraits. Some of them were self-portraits and some were portraits of others, but they were all photographs of a person looking directly into the camera when sitting straight up on a chair. Sometimes I played with the amount of clothing, the position of the hands and other small differences, but basically they remained the same.

Now, why did I do that and why do I continue to do that? Because it is my way of manifesting the mirror stage of Lacan's theory, using the camera as the gaze and where what I wish to see is never what I look at.

In my piece *What I look at is never what I wish to see*, I photographed two women with a large format camera and printed their portraits a little bigger than life-size. A piece underlining the famous alienation I mentioned, already, in the introduction of this paper.

The choice of the models being female was intentional, of course, since I agree with Kristeva that the ideals of identification are gendered. And as both Barthes and Lacan claim about language- that it structures subjectivity- so does Judith Butler, in the introduction of her book "Bodies that Matter", claim that gender structures bodies. In that way gender determines possible bodily experiences. It is not just a norm but part of what she, along with Foucault, calls a "regulatory ideal". Butler writes: "It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize "sex" and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms." (Butler 1993:1-2).

In the end I framed the photographs in wood and glass, not to protect the images but to enable the viewers to see their own reflections and in that way making possible the doubling of the process of looking at oneself.

(A LATE FRIENDLY TALK ABOUT THE SHOW "ME, MYSELF AND I")

X: "Why do you talk so much about painting and then do not paint yourself?"

S: "Do I? Well, I've always talked a lot about what I'm not."

X: "The show has a lot of different media, why is that?"

S: "I'm very composed myself and I might still fear external categorization."

X: "You work a lot with the number 3 or things divided into three parts. Can you talk about that?"

S: "For a long time I wanted to become Christian and even if I did not succeed in either Protestantism or Catholicism, I got the point about the importance of the number 3 being the magical male splitting of Western contemporary society."

X: "Has that got something to do with the gaze as well?"

S: "Certainly, God is male and he is watching us all the time."

X: "Is there anything you would like to add?"

S: "Sure! My thanks to anybody supporting me with the show and with anything else. I've this bad tendency to think that I am -and should be- able to manage by myself. A really bad habit that is.. well, funnily enough.. very unreal."

REFERENCES:

- **Barthes, Roland:** "The Death of the Author" (1951) in *Image, Music, Text*, 1990, pp. 142-148. London: Fontana Press. ISBN: 0-00-686135-0.
- **Butler, Judith:** "Introduction" in *Bodies that Matter*, 1993, pp. 1-23. Routledge. ISBN: 0-415-90366-1.
- **Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Félix:** "Introduction: Rhizome" in *A Thousand Plateaus (1980)*, 2004, pp. 3-25. Continuum International Publishing Group. ISBN: 0-826-47694-5.
- **Freud, Sigmund:** *Det Uhyggelige (1947)*, 1998. Cph: Rævens Sorte Bibliotek. ISBN: 87-7378-158-4.
- **Johnson, Andrew:** *Information* July 12th 2008.
- **Kristeva, Julia:** *Tales of Love (1941)*, 1987. New York: Columbia University Press. ISBN: 0-231-06024-6.
- **Lacan, Jacques:** *Écrits –a selection (1966)*, 2001, pp 1-8. Routledge Classics. ISBN: 0-415-25392-6.
- *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (1973)*, 1981. USA: Norton Paperback. ISBN: 0-393-31775-7.
- **Levi-Strauss, Claude:** *The Raw and the Cooked (1964)*, 1970. UK: Fletcher and Son Ltd. SBN: 224-61868-7.
- **McCarthy, Paul:** *Painter*, 1995. Video:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozubKHdprMI&feature=related>