

Bjorn Inge Follevaag 2015

The necessity of repetition. About Bjørg Taranger

The necessity of repetition

Street photography is not journalism. Street photography ignores outside opinion because the street photographer is driven by subjective observation, sense and reaction. As the street photographer reacts the subject is already disappearing.

Our everyday lives often consist of repetitive habits and actions. One could even claim that repetitive action is a main characteristic of our existence; Human activity, conversation and even language could be described as near monotonous repetition. According to the existentialist philosopher Heidegger, the human form of being, *das Dasein* (being there) symbolizes our relentless focus on what existence could or might have been. *Das Dasein* – man's being in the world – is based on caring and attentive awareness; key elements of Bjørg Taranger's artistic practice. Like many other artists working with photography - Lee Friedlander, Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand or Robert Frank - the challenges of ordinary life and everyday activity are important to Taranger. But she is perhaps more influenced by the American photographer Lewis Hine, who for years documented child labour in American mines and factories in more than 5000 images. These anonymous documentary images were instrumental to the reform and abolishment of child labour in America.

Taranger's video works are highly influenced by street photography. The works are unpretentious, with an eye for narratives that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. She offers a candid but clearly edited picture of everyday life as well as an appeal to the imagination; how might these stories develop? Like in everyday life, they are repetitive and appear self contained; isolated, seemingly independent of time or any clear storyline beyond what is captured on film. After years of systematic documentation Taranger has an immense amount of material, which she splits; cross cuts and reassembles without the need for a linear timeframe. Although a small or peripheral marker in an image might date the work, time remains subservient to the essential event; the people or movement it depicts.

The Danish philosopher and theologian K.E. Løgstrup, known for his philosophical essay "*The Ethical Demand*", claims that an ethical demand is always tacit and based on recognition – a recognition that "*when we meet the other we always hold a piece of his life in our hands*". The philosophical point is that relationships between humans are often based on power, and with inequality of power the ethical demand becomes essential.

In the spirit of Løgstrup, Taranger's street photography/street video lets her «hold something of the other's life in her hands». Taranger's subjects have not consented to or been informed about their participation. They are often unaware of being filmed and therefore subjected to Taranger's ethical awareness, an ethical awareness that is a key characteristic in the reworking of her raw material.

Another interesting parallel can be found in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, a film describing the meeting between a French actress recording an anti-war film in Japan, and her encounter with a Japanese architect who is trying to come to terms with the atrocities of Hiroshima. They are both confronted by their past and attempting to come to terms with what has happened to them. The timeline never reveals whether the story happened in 1945 or 1959. Nor is this essential. The film critic Kent Jones describes it as: "... *dissolving the barriers between film time and real time, fictional space and real space, stories and documentaries. ... erecting a complex, rhythmically precise fictional construction in which pieces of reality are caught and allowed to retain their essential strangeness and ominous neutrality*". Or as David Green writes about *Sections of a Happy Moment* (2007) by video artist David Claerbout, another of Taranger's sources of inspiration - "*What one actually experiences or indeed what one sees in this work, is not the conflation of photography and film but, a conjuncture of the two mediums in which neither ever loses its specificity. We are thus faced with a phenomenon in which two different mediums co-exist and seem to simultaneously occupy the same object. The projection screen here provides a point of intersection for both the photographic and filmic image*".

But perhaps Taranger's interest in David Claerbout's work becomes more evident if we look at his work *Sunrise* from 2009; an 18 minute long work filmed in almost complete darkness, about a maid who having finished her work just before dawn, leaves the house on her bike and cycles into a desolate landscape to the sound of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* (1912). The parallel to Taranger's *Lavanderia* (*Laundry*), (2014) lies in the focus on people and situations rarely observed.

The shift between past and present provides Taranger with the opportunity to discuss presence; the essential issue of *being* and of *having been*. About traces and movements that will never be recorded in our history books but which, through her work, become significant; whether it is a film about an elderly man dancing tango in a park in Buenos Aires, a homeless man who tries his best to hide from the camera or a maid doing laundry for her affluent employers. In the video *After the raid # I-IV* (2014) Taranger attends to a constant stream of approaching airplanes without knowing their purpose or destination. A helicopter hovers over the landscape and a sense of surveillance becomes a key element of the medial narrative and political reference reminiscent of Norwegian artist Per Kleiva's images of the Vietnam War. Taranger uses media narratives to discuss how the presentation of news may create false impression, as in the CNN quote from George Bush, where he claims that the war in Iraq will create «a better future» - repeated ad nauseam in an endless loop.

Taranger's video works focus on everyday situations and events. Her approach is personal but never private. The thin line between personal and private is often difficult to maintain. In a Norwegian art context the contrast between being personal and private can perhaps best be illustrated through the works of the artist Charlotte Thiis-Evensen and her merciless exposure of people's private lives – or in the work of Swedish artist

Anna Odell in «Unknown, Woman 2009 – 349701» in which she simulates suicide from a bridge in Stockholm as part of a performance, without letting the public know that this is all staged.

In view of Løgstrup's claim that *"when we meet the other we always hold a piece of his life in our hands"*, it is ethically questionable when an artist chooses to include life events or human reality without asking for consent. It is vital to assess the ethical consequences of a work of art before it is created. In those cases where the ethical discussion is introduced post production, as in the two cases above, it serves no other purpose than the media attention it creates, rendering the ethical discussion an element of a marketing strategy. An ethical discussion is about «what is good», «what is right», and «how should I act». In a secular, humanistic society, ethics is basically a question of decency. In terms of decency Taranger's works have a valid ethical foundation, not as something learned, but rather as an integrated dimension of her artistic practice that stems from personal life and experience. Art does not have to be ethical. Art often needs to address moral questions and taboos, of which there are multiple examples. However art should not be harmful; and visual art above all needs to spur emotions. Taranger's narratives are ethically as well as aesthetically present in the universally recognizable form of constant repetition, day after day, in all cultures of the world.

Translated by Gillian Carson

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