

Lisa Strömbeck – New Friends

For anyone who has had the privilege of following Lisa Strömbeck's artistic endeavours during the last decade, her latest exhibition "New friends" at Uppsala Art Museum, stands out as something of a benchmark in a career marked by consistency and thematic stringency.

Her latest works may very well strike the viewer with their common set of imagery: in each piece we see a display of dogs either interacting with each other or with human beings. The presence of dogs in Strömbeck's art is hardly coincidental. Her first photos and videos displaying stray dogs (*Vacation in Goa*) was created already back in 1998 after a trip to India. Even in these early works one could detect several recurring themes that have been taken up and given different expressions throughout the years. The dogs are hardly there in order to communicate a perceived ideal about a natural state; neither are they there simply to be cute and clever. Instead, the presence of dogs allows the artist to focus on a specifically human form of cultural or social interaction that is anything but cute. Important themes are, in that regard, power relationships, domination and even brutality, although balanced by human phenomena such as humour, love, loyalty and a desire to relate to others, thereby indicating the possibility of atonement.

The overarching interest in social relationships and power play has been something of a common denominator in Lisa Strömbeck's art over the years, often manifesting itself in a rather obvious class or gender perspective. This has been particularly patent in her participation in the feminist artist collective *Women Down the Pub*, which has been responsible for a series of projects that have stirred up quite some attention, such as *Herstories Tour* (2000) that stressed neglected aspects of female cultural history; or the publication of the feminist art history of Denmark since the 1960s, *View* (2004).

One of the primary aesthetic tools in Lisa Strömbeck's art has to do with the communication of a narrative or a message to the viewer. This is one of the reasons why a quasi-documentary style has come to characterise her works. Also the strategy of working

with photographic series or the presence of speech bubbles in her collages of later years, serves the same purpose, allowing them the possibility to carry a narrative.

An art that so forcefully stresses the content or the message aspect certainly runs the risk of degenerating into some kind of politically correct *agitprop*, but that hurdle is circumvented rather elegantly by Lisa Strömbeck by giving humour and ambiguity an important role to play. In this way her works are never devoid of implicit reflexivity or even 'self critique'. Her art never closes itself into unequivocal dogmatism, but remains open and possible to interpret in a manifold of ways, regardless of the position of the beholder.

A more finely tuned, but nevertheless very effective, instrument in making the narrative come across has to do with the formal composition of her pieces. Regardless whether dealing with a video, a photograph or a collage, her strategy is to expel everything that is not necessary and to give maximum focus on the object at hand. The person that speaks, the figure that acts is what counts – nothing else. Background and formal context has to be reduced or are in some cases totally eliminated, as in her collages. Everything that interrupts the free transmission of the message and the communication with the viewer is reduced as much as possible. The quest is here to create an artwork free from irrelevant 'static noise'.

At the present exhibition the absence of frames around the images serves the same purpose. A frame may in some cases define a specific object as a work of art viewed as something detached from the surrounding space. But without this institutional 'framework', the images are free to take a step out in the room and relate uninterrupted with the surrounding architecture. The same thing can be said about her videos. They are not presented on monitors that always run the risk of putting too much emphasis to the technological context; nor are they shown in a confined space, a black cube with chairs or benches, that renders too much of a theatrical or institutional dimension to the pieces. Her videos are instead presented directly on the walls through large projections, in close relation to the other pieces at the show, as

well as to the exhibition space in general. Lisa Strömbeck's works are in this aspect remarkably inclusive, and aim in the last instance to also include the viewer. A clear-cut example of this inclusive aspect of her art is the installation *Resting Place* (2000), where a shed had been erected around a bed put there for the benefit of the visitors. The bed was in turn surrounded by four monitors showing animals in different stages of sleep. In this case the artwork is not complete until the visitor places himself *in concretu* in the work.

This is the general context in which we have to understand the presence of dogs in Lisa Strömbeck's works. At least since the end of the last Ice Age, some ten thousand years ago, the relationship between man and dog has been an established fact. The relationship between the two species has taken many forms during the aeons, but has clearly developed into a symbiotic one that in the greater scheme of things has been favourable to both parties. The cooperation has been strengthened by the very fact that both man and dog are social beings, with a conscious understanding of hierarchies, domination, and cooperation. In the interaction between dogs we see the whole spectrum of group behaviour at play – from strict domination to mutual altruism – in a purer form than what is possible when we study most human contexts, and where the interpretation of events runs the risk of being blurred by the ideological or cultural presuppositions of the viewer.

We may take the video *Hierarchy* (2008) as an example. This piece has been filmed on the outskirts of the Bulgarian capital Sofia, where large packs of stray dogs have found their habitat. The 15 minutes sequence shows how a group of people are preparing the set for filming and lures a group of dogs to the camera by throwing large amounts of meat on the ground. What follows is an accurate study in hierarchical behaviour. The 'alpha male' is first on the scene, eating his fill and keeping the other dogs away by his mere presence, until he, almost dizzy from all the food, stumbles out of camera. It is not until he has gone that the other dogs dare approach the food. They move carefully, pinching tiny bits of meat in order to devour at a distance so as not to offend their leader. On a superficial level we are confronted

with a remarkably unequal relationship between individuals where access to important valuables (in this case food) is governed by brute force. But in a wider context, it is hard to see this sequence in such an unambiguous fashion. What we see is also a singular but functioning social organism dominated by cohesion and where a myriad of other relationships are exposed beyond the fact of pure dominance. And in the last instance an even larger power complex appears, where human beings and the human society constitutes the dominating factor.

In *The First Command* (2008) the human presence is even more apparent. We see a young boy and his dog sitting in a naked room. The boy tries to utter a command – he is trying to say ‘kiss!’, whereby the dog is supposed to lick him in the face. The problem is that he is stuttering and cannot express his command properly. The dog is waiting impatiently for an order that never comes. It is both painful and funny at the same time, and the boy is obviously having a hard time not breaking out in laughter. This piece accentuates the role of communication within the framework of a given relation of power. A specific command can only be translated into action if it can be spoken, and in this piece we see how a power relationship ends up in a state of paralysis due to the fact that none of the those involved can do what is expected of them. Yet another aspect of this work is that it puts into question the most simplistic interpretation of what power and domination really is. Power certainly means that someone is in command and that another one is obeying, but that does not necessarily mean that power should be viewed exclusively in terms of oppression, exploitation and injustice. In this video we are instead confronted with a power relationship informed by mutual affection and good will. These are some of the positive aspects, embedded in most power relationships, that many political analysts, critics and zealots have had such difficulty explaining. An understanding of the phenomenon is hardly possible without first coming to grips with the fact that most people gladly accept established power relationships.

In Memory of All Those Who Work Without Ever Getting a Reward (2006-2007) brings up these questions from yet another perspective. This piece is a video trilogy showing a little dog

placed in front of a series of almost insurmountable temptations. In the first part he balances a sausage on his nose; in the second he is standing in front of a huge pile of sausages that he is not allowed to touch; and in the third, the very same dog is balancing slices of sausages on his paws, while glancing longingly at the camera. The black, white and tan colours of the dog and the bright red sausages are depicted against a background of white fabric (similar to a painter's canvas) thereby creating a visual expression that seems to transcend the line of demarcation between painting and electronic art. On a formal level, this piece represents a break of sorts with the snapshot aesthetics that characterises so much of Lisa Strömbeck's other works – and with a very good result. No human being is present here, but it is hardly possible that an animal could refrain from following its natural instincts to such a degree without human interference somewhere in the background. The very title of the piece constitutes a narrative or a little morality play in itself, pointing at the perhaps discomfiting fact that not every one of us is rewarded according to our deserts. But the title also indicates that we are standing in front of a monument. Here we are confronted with a very contemporary problem regarding the place of monuments in today's art. The difficulty of placing a hero, cast in bronze, on top of a plinth is circumvented here through the highlighting of everyday banality, rather than heroic exceptionality, and through the fact that the deed is shown in electronic real time, rather than as a symbolised past.

The exhibition at Uppsala Art Museum also includes two photographic series – here shown for the first time. One of them bears the same title as the show itself: *New Friends* (2008). Here we see a recuperation of content and themes that were present in her first photographs of dogs from 1997. Just as in the first series, the imagery is fetched from India and a pack of stray dogs roaming the beaches and living off the remains of fish caught by local fishermen. It is a hard life these dogs lead, with precisely the same relations of power and domination that can be detected among the dogs from Bulgaria in *Hierarchy*. But the fact is that no dog is capable of survival in this forbidding environment – regardless of whether a leader or follower – if they do not stick together. And everyone seems to have a place in this pack. The images focus on the almost absurd deformities these dogs are

subject to: broken and badly healed legs, torn ears, poked-out eyes, etc. But in this social puzzle these deformities are transformed into individual markers and special qualities – what one dog cannot do, another will accomplish easily. One is also struck by the apparent joy and fearlessness these dogs express. One detects a clear desire among these animals to communicate – with the camera, and in last instance, with the viewer at the exhibition. It is as if they want the viewer to take part and join their pack. The title of the series, *New Friends*, should not come as a surprise...

With the other series – *Uniform* (2008) – it is quite another matter. In contrast to the quasi-documentary style that is often found in the works of Lisa Strömbeck, with their outdoor sceneries, these images are composed as dramatically cropped close-ups, where the borderline between intimacy and claustrophobia seems hard to detect. The interrelationship between man and dog is emphasised in this piece as well, although uncomfortably twisted to a certain extent. Each image shows a dog being embraced by a human being wearing a fur coat similar in colour and texture to that of the dog. The furs are of course not made of dog skin, but the motifs nevertheless point towards the ambiguous relationship man often has with his surrounding nature. Some animals are slaughtered under almost industrial conditions, while others enjoy their status as spoiled pets. Because of the composition of the images, it is almost impossible to know where man ends and the animal begins, as though they were morphed into one another, and where aspects of tenderness coincide with brutality and sex. The title *Uniform* addresses the type of mutual influence that characterises people living in a social context. Regardless of what place one enjoys in a specific hierarchy, one starts to borrow from one another; a system of behaviour, language and idiosyncrasies develops – a culture starts to emerge with its own singular expressions. In this piece it is apparent that no one, neither man nor animal, is immune to the kind of interaction embedded in every kind of power relationship.

The proverb will have it that the dog often becomes like his master. What Lisa Strömbeck also wants to show us, however, is to what extent the master also becomes like his dog.

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