

Lisa Strömbeck: A Woman Under the Influence
--a casual introduction to her works of the late '90s

The director John Cassavetes once lamented that people, nowadays, die, emotionally, around the age of 21, and that his own body of work was designed as a 'roadmap' to 'help people get past 21...how to save pain.' One might say the same about Swedish artist Lisa Strömbeck: each work is an episode in an ongoing mission for serenity in eclectic, modern life—sometimes comical and self-ironic, always candid, but rarely cynical. Though firmly situated in present-day life, Strömbeck's works have the same feeling of serendipity through ordinary living one usually only sees in classic films: even the greatest ennui, the sharpest pains, the deepest disappointments, and the most fantastic good fortune are all somehow worth it in the end. Every moment on film is the work of a woman with a great eye and a greater heart—and although Strömbeck herself would tell you that she is more partial to Cassavetes and Gena Rowlands, I can't help but think she's got a poppier-Vincente Minnelli in her soul somewhere.

Since the mid-1990's, Strömbeck has created art that is wry and self-referential, without succumbing full-ham to the lure of the lurid confessional. Her style tends to the documentary-snapshot, depicting a single day or moment in time (in works like 1999's *One Day*, or the comical *Keen Competition*, a collaboration with Andrea Creutz from 1997), or a brief study of 'way-of-life' (as in *Man and Family* and *The Seekers*, both from 1996). Although her stories are culled from real life, the complete storyline (or Strömbeck's motives) are never *fully* revealed, bringing her subjects into fascinating half-relief through their total—but only momentary—candor. Take, for example, her 1998 installation *Imagine This*, in which Strömbeck ventures into the cold Swedish woods with her father, where he pinpoints the location of old rabbit cages, gardens, an outhouse, and barn on the grounds where he grew up. As Strömbeck's father casually instructs her what to shoot, he curiously declares, at the end, 'OK—Let's go home. Now we have seen the misery...' Consider also the 1995 piece *Love Inventory*, in which Strömbeck contacted all the men she had been in love with during her life (since the age of 7), then visited and interviewed most of them: a process which culminated in seventeen plates (later made as a brochure) and a 40-minute-long video. In the plates, each crush, or affair, is abridged to the size of a single paragraph, briefly describing Lisa's attraction, the trajectory of the relationship, then a prudent summing-up of its failure. The video features 9 of the men, responding with surprising frankness to Strömbeck's easygoing demeanor, on their expectations of love, women, and themselves. However, the tension of the piece lies in all that is *unspoken* between Lisa and the men in her life: there's a tense implicitness that they will discuss only 'so' much—hardly ever discussing their own past relationships directly. (Interestingly, it's through these modified confession of her subjects that the viewer comes to infer the most about Strömbeck herself, who never appears on film during the piece.) Since the *Love Inventory*, she has increasingly diversified her methods (as a frequent collaborator with Andrea Creutz, and the collectives LAB and Women down the Pub) and subject-matter (increasingly featuring dogs, including her own beloved circus-dog, Ivan, as characters in her work). But the blue-jeans 'Frieze of Life' feeling to Lisa Strömbeck's body of work remains a constant. Both *Love Inventory* and *Imagine This* use distortions of

memory, accounts of relationships through time, and unarticulated emotional intimacies (whether with boyfriends or father) to great effect, and the use of video as real-time truth-telling device heightens this.

Another characteristic shared with John Cassavetes is Strömbeck's emphasis on improvisation and performance in everyday acts. 1999's *En Dag (One Day)* is an account of one woman's day-long trek through public transportation and the workplace, then back again, saying nothing but 'Hi.' *Keen Competition*, a 1997 collaboration with Andrea Creutz, is a satirical piece on the exaggerated performance of the maternal instinct, as Creutz and Strömbeck babysit a third friend's child, and attempt to outdo each other for the distinction of being 'good with kids.' In the 1996 video piece *Lady in Red* (the granddaddy of her video-performance pieces), Strömbeck is featured in a red t-shirt and white all-purpose underwear furiously cleaning her apartment to the Chris deBurgh ballad of the same name. The lofty romantic notions of the femininity suggested by the song are lampooned heartily in the video—underlining the fact that an otherwise catchy song has no bearing on the reality of a woman's life at all. Moldy food is sniffed and thrown out, wan flowers in a window are spritzed with an indifferent water bottle, and an already spotless toilet is scrubbed with ferocity. Among other things, *Lady in Red* is easily the 1990's greatest tribute to obsessive-compulsive disorder: even the song itself has the odd character of a song you might listen to 27 times a day for a brief period in life. The cleaning initiative lasts only as long as the song (just under 4 minutes), and as the screen fades to black, the soundtrack turns to applause: a coy affirmation of the fact that, of all the daily performative acts in a woman's life, there is no audience for housework, and no great reward for a performance well-done. Of all her video works in the 1990's, *Lady in Red* is the only piece that features Strömbeck's body so prominently as a character in the psychological action.

A bubbly popular-music soundtrack is one of the hallmarks of a Lisa Strömbeck work (she is a great admirer of Dolly Parton and the great women of American Country's Golden Age). Music is not only a mechanism by which she can underscore the pluckiness and charisma native to her works, but a subtle device to illustrate how popular music plays a deep, evocative role in the psychology of everyday life: in spite of the disparity between our everyday tribulations and the inflated, clichéd love-and-loss scenarios of popular music. *Real Real Gone*, an unexpectedly sad piece (and a great example of expressionistic documentary), from 1996, is a slow-motion pan of bustling passers-by in Copenhagen, taking scarce notice of the lonely person behind the camera. The soundtrack is the slow-hummed song *Real Real Gone*, which couples with the filmic perspective to create a work of total isolation, of everyday loneliness (Lisa's use of music in this manner as a *psychological* soundtrack predates even Lars von Trier's). The 1996 piece *Man and Family* uses country-music classics, like Dolly Parton's *Jolene* and Lynn Anderson's rendition of *Stand By Your Man* to examine the changeable, evasive search for love with the perfect mate.

These days, Strömbeck's art, like her life, has undergone something akin to Zen with the arrival of Ivan, a Swedish circus-dog who can pirouette, jump through hoops, and loves to be filmed (for more on Lisa's life with Ivan, see Søren Martinsen's fantastic art-documentary *Shadows and Magic*). Through her filmed interactions with dogs, in pieces like 1998's *God's Gifts*, Strömbeck is able to subordinate and refine the strong psychological aspect of her earlier works by capturing a relationship on film that is not dependent on dialogue. The psychology of her most recent works (*God's Gifts* and *One Day*, notably) is more metaphorical and laconic than before. She is able to say something about herself through documentation of dogs: and the consequent aesthetic in works like *God's Gifts* is much more striking—almost still-photographic—in its nature than her previous works. Serenity in life, courtesy of Ivan's arrival, is reflected in Strömbeck's ease,

aptitude, and prolificness with her video-camera, and is never dry of ideas for what to shoot. Examined against her body of work to date, it's exciting to think what new avenues her video work will take in its 'roadmap' of modern consciousness.