

Angela Rosenberg/Andreas Schlaegel

Loss and Longing

On the work of Lisa Strömbeck

In *Gulliver's Travels* Jonathan Swift portrays the hero's passage through shifting power relationships as he encounters different cultures, societies and ideologies. One particular culture exists entirely without language, its inhabitants always carry the objects they need to refer to on their backs with them. Life in this world is a heavy burden, but the people there also inhabit a world of fullness, where meaning is not removed from the object. It is a complete world, it knows neither absence nor loss, because it can't articulate an object that is not there. Therefore this world knows no symbols, because for an object to be a symbol, it requires to be removed from what it symbolizes. The world we live in however is loaded with symbolism: everything means something that in turn refers to something else.

There is a very particular sensibility involved in Lisa Strömbeck's work that is not easy to describe. As much of her recent work is generated from interviewing people, asking them questions about their private lives in their particular situation, one part of this sensibility allows the artist to communicate directly with her interviewees, devoid of alienation or condescension, even when stories begin to lean towards the sentimental. The people in the video don't show reservations, and allow the viewer very intimate access to their lives and minds. And there is no sense of exploitation, there may only the slightest moment of irony involved, if at all, even though there is an apparent artistic/strategic interest involved. At most many people appear bemused that one could actually listen to so arbitrary stories, so banal, as the ones they have to tell. As if Strömbeck was the first person to show any concern. Like an archaeologist the artist calmly and carefully uncovers layers of meaning, recording them in as unique moments in her sketchy, and immediate semi-documentary video-essays. Going for the heart of the matter, for the intimate and personal, but also for unspectacular and everyday qualities the technology of video allows for. Exactly by avoiding the spectacular and focussing on the everyday life of everyday people, these stories form elements of a meta-narrative, with unsettling qualities.

You need to listen carefully when a middle-aged woman talks on her relationship to her horses for example, or the former owner of "the perfect dog" recalls his dead companion at the pet cemetery. Or when an old actress compares her life in East Berlin and today. When Strömbeck picks up a video camera, she does not scare away from recovering controversial narratives. She finds, observes and documents whole concepts of lives that have come apart, and were mended again, to crack even wider open on a symbolic level, allowing the silly moments of daily life to reflect the shortcomings of the world in general and our society in particular. Coherence is not easy to maintain on the literal level, but the artist allows for no punch line to reduce all to a joke and reaffirm everything. Instead she allows her protagonists to re-articulate seemingly fixed meanings, by their completely personal accounts, where subtle variations generate an alarming subversive potential. Explaining complicated matters in their own words, like the effects of historic developments, or instances that afforded complex moral judgement, and the impact, emotionally, on their lives, reflects a society on the verge of breaking down. Not in terms of people living in denial, but the way they themselves reflect a neurotic state of mind of western society, suffering from a lost memory.

Strömbeck has embarked on an artistic journey to retrace these memories. The intimate accounts she collected, examining more than the individual's reinforcement of existing imperfect structures. Functioning on literal and metaphoric levels, the accounts render individuals in their real and symbolic surrounding, in a structure that appears to be gravitating around a universal centre of lack, and obsessed with concealing it. The existential desire for wholeness, closing Lacan's "hole in the self", is an exercise of subjective successive attempts to close through an endless chain of substitutes: the perfect car, the perfect boyfriend, the perfect home. But as soon as one is acquired, the desire will move on to something else. It is an itch that can never be scratched, because it is finally representational.

Focussing on identity, identification and the changing power relations, Strömbeck's work deals with the economics of love and desire. By negotiating the imperfect substitutes that are supplemented, she probes the very foundations of western culture, social order and ultimately the common ideology facilitating it. Because the ideology of a society consists of commonly articulated values, it also depends on its flipside of implicit prerequisites and values to go unarticulated, so as not to destabilize it. Strömbeck's collected personal accounts together form a deconstructive language that have the potential to achieve just that. Her work is on many levels very personal, involving her love for her father, her pets, her boyfriends, but by putting everything in relation with other people's lives, she has not only discovered similarities or differences, rather she attempts to move through the phantasms of our society's ideology. Simply by talking to people, by allowing them to articulate their desires, she uncovers the ideology's hidden values represented in everyday scenarios, and reveals them as precarious situations. What we hear being said in her videos is the camouflaged return of our repressed common truth. Using the ability of video as a communicative medium Strömbeck draws the attention of the viewer to the symbolic character of all communication.

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