

## PERFORMANCE AS IT RELATES TO GENDER, IDENTITY AND POWER

Av Veronica Diesen

This year's special exhibitor at the Hugesund Film Festival is the Bergen based visual artist Rita Marhaug. She has studied both at Bergen National College of Applied Art and Design, Vestlandets Academy of Art and The University of Bergen. Upon finishing her education, performance art has been one of her main forms of artistic expression. In this exhibition, which she has chosen to call *The Geography of Intimacy (Fortrolighetens geografi)*, she has staged her three children in relation to the theme that address questions concerning gender and identity. The results of her experiments can be seen in the two main exhibition rooms of the Hugesund Billedgalleri. The first room shows three series of photos. The pictures are mounted on the wall in combination with single works lying on low pedestals. In the second room there are several video projections.

Performance art as a tradition is marked most for of all by its active and staged character. This genre started mainly as a protest against the institutionalization of the object of art. By creation art from one's own activity, artists endeavored to tear themselves loose from the traditional art-object. This activity also proved to marginalize the understanding and interpretation of art itself, as the artist no longer saw it as necessary to exhibit objects in established galleries. To the contrary, general public spaces became a significant arena for the communication of art. Another important element which performance brought to the art scene was its emphasis upon the activity of creation, which again spawned even greater and richer possibilities for artists to express themselves. An artist today, for example, no longer needs to wait in order to be accepted into or approved by the art institution. One can create art in the countryside, just outside a museum, on the sidewalk, home by oneself, in a hotel or in a self-appointed gallery room, etc.

Last year for example (2000), Marhaug exhibited her work at the private apartment-gallery Døgnfluen (meaning the ephemeral fly whose lifespan is but one day) in Bergen, which I administrated together with Arne Rygg and Morten Kvamme. Here Marhaug showed a performance with her teenage daughter Emilie. Both were clad in clothing, with arms in comradeship draped over each other's shoulders. Within the space of the fifteen-minute performance, menstrual blood began to appear on their clothing.

In the aftermath of this performance, which was called 13 + 35 (2000), I recall Rita telling me how pissed off she was by all those male fantasies that seemed to ravage the Northern European art scene of the 1990's. Here it may be interesting to draw a parallel to Knut Åsdam's famous video *Pissing* (1995). The video, which is quite simple in its expression, shows the lower torso of a boy/man who urinates on himself through his clothing. The whole situation is marked by an infantile helplessness and can be interpreted as an expression of male art at its most extreme, just as much as it may be a critique of the same. What is interesting about *Pissing* is that in spite of the actor urinating on himself, there is something in the slim boyish hips, the trendy light trousers and the carelessness of the act that, as a whole, works to give this impression. By contrast, it is not cool when menstrual blood starts to appear on the lightly colored clothing of a mother and daughter. This is because being cool depends upon not having any worries. Menstruation implies something that binds one to responsibility and duty, provided one does not take the necessary precautions. Instead of indicating infantilism, Rita Marhaug's performance points to the process of maturation, which happens to women while they are as yet young girls.

But what does it mean to be 'woman'? In the book *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir describes how one is not born as a woman, but how one becomes one. According to de Beauvoir, the understanding of gender is an important aspect in the process of constructing our identity. We all have, of necessity, required the relative conventions and values that are grounded in the culture into which we are born. But precisely because these values are not eternally true but of a relative character, we need not take them for granted or accept them without further ado. For example, in most cultures the man has played a dominant role. He has been perceived as the natural subject defining his environment, which includes woman. In the West today, however, the belief in then man's neutrality is collapsing. We have begun to address the problems men have in relation to their identity, problems which, through tradition, have been laid on them. In the video *Small Man at the Photographer's* (*Liten mann hos fotografen*) de Beauvoir's words are turned upside down when Marhaug, clothed as a man, comes across a pastiche of the Beauvoir's words: "one is not born as a man, it is something one becomes".

For what is a man? Is he something by the power of his physical strength or his so-called active sexuality?

Rita Marhaug has worked with questions tied to what we view as typical masculinity. She has done this, among other things, in performances using sports of strength, such as weight lifting, boxing and karate. As de Beauvoir pointed out, the masculine gender has been viewed as both more real and more neutral than the feminine. A man's dominance has been seen as part of this superiority. The male strength has also been perceived as belonging to something more primitive and more original than the feminine predilection for self-decoration and foolishness. Today, however, this physical dominance is not particularly important for most occupations. Thus, male physical dominance is confirmed primarily through sports. Sports of strength and endurance such as football, boxing weight lifting, etc., are a significant channel for a man's confirmation of his masculine identity. By contrast, in her artistic performances, Marhaug has tried to show how these concepts such as strength and endurance are most of all cultural factors, which are also steered by fetishes and various sorts of staging.

These masculine 'fetishisms of strength', as I choose to call them, pervade this entire exhibition. For example, in the photo series of six pictures entitled *Outside the Garage* (*Utenfor garasjen*) (2001), Marhaug appears together with her daughter Emilie in front of a gray concrete wall. Both are clad in the daughter's hip-hop cloths and the mother's boxing and weight lifting gear.

In the second series of large photos called *In the Garden* (*I hagen*) (2001), both the mother and the daughter Sofie are portrayed in the same red flower dress. All the pictures are taken in the winter and the grass is frozen, creating a clear contrast to the summery light dress the models wear. Again, there are contrasting elements where the mother and daughter wear boxing gloves or where this equipment lays as part of the staged composition of the portraits. Most of the pictures are close-ups. The girls stare directly, confronting the viewer.

In one of the pictures depiction Rita Marhaug, or the mother herself, she lays half reclining on her elbows with a fur coat as a blanket and stares up towards the camera. The dress is low cut, revealing the mother's tattoos on her chest and arms: *Herz-Schmerz* (*Hart-Pain*) and the birth dates of her children. The hands are formed into fists and the whole expression is hard, contrasting with the motherly care one would generally expect in such a role-play.

In one of the videos, Marhaug is portrayed in the same dress as these photographs, this time without the daughters but with the German Shepard Sonia. In another video seen in the

second room, Rita stages a karate match where her children Kaspar and Sofie fight. Her wish was that both children would wear blond angle wigs, but the video reveals that the son not so easily cajoled into compliance: the karate match was OK of course, but the wig proved beyond the limits of what he would tolerate. According to this, the final result had to be adjusted.

In all these portraits there is a form of 'identification' through the use of identical clothing. The roles between artist-child and mother-child function in different ways, simultaneously the expression helps to intensify the feeling of each person's individuality. These pictorial situations can be said to contain a 'relational aesthetic', where the point of tension between the viewer and mother-Emilie, between mother-Sofie, between Rita-Sonia, etc., emphasizes how differently our impression of each individual person can be, all according to which situation we see them in: viewed according to a relational aesthetic, no permanent relation exists, not even that between mother-daughter. According to Deleuze/Guattari, understanding the world via dualistic concepts, such as man-woman, masculine-feminine, gives a very fallacious picture of our field of experience. As an alternative of this view, they suggest a philosophy where language is bent away from its traditional categories, opening up the possibility of multiplication: instead of saying either-or, why not ask about the nuances in between? Instead of claiming that there is either man or woman, why not open up for the idea that there may be several genders?

A last important aspect I wish to focus on *The Geography of Intimacy*, is Marhaug's emphasis on marginalized and trivial expressions, in that she ties her art to the private sphere of the every day. For example, most of her pictures are taken just outside the family's home. Furthermore, all the titles are very simple; they are either *Utenfor garasjen (Outside the Garage)*, *Liten mann (Small Man)*, and not at least *Hver dag (Every Day)*. The convention is also used in the series of large photo based intaglio prints. The photos were spawned on a journey Marhaug and her family made last summer from Sunnmøre to Hordaland. All these pictures show a familiar phenomenon of western Norwegian experience: the winding, narrow asphalt roads couched between steep vertical cliffs and fjords, all seen from inside a compact and cramped family car, as it is in motion. Here the spectacular and oh so nationally romantic nature is related to the triviality of today's auto-culture. A key to interpret this series of pictures is the emphasis on everyday experience. The enclosed space of the car, the monotonous driving and the repetitive landscape are the elements that form the geography of intimacy. More like mapping a story that constitutes its own validity through what we recon and recognize: the intimate.

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*Veronica Diesen works as freelance curator, writer and lecturer.  
(b.1969)Cand. Philol.  
BA: History of Art, BA: Visual Communication, MA: Philosophy*