

## THE RULES OF THE GAME - ELINA HEIKKA, ANNA-KAISA RASTENBERGER

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This interview is based on a conversation that took place in Elina Brotherus' home in Helsinki on 6th March 2016.

**Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger (AKR):** What does this retrospective mean for you?

**Elina Brotherus (EB):** This word is rather pompous, it sounds like a joke – I would rather really not use it. But Gilles Mora, who curated the exhibition, wanted to display my most recent photographs along with some of my first works. My first exhibition was with Finnish photographer Andrei Lajunen in 1998 after I graduated, some 18 years ago this year.

**Elina Heikka (EH):** So this is a mid-career retrospective. This is quite usual, isn't it, at this point, after 20 years of artistic work?

EB: I would rather be a young artist than halfway through my career, because when you are young, you have fun and everything is in front of you. You can still be discovered. Youth is looked up to nowadays. When you're 40 and over, you become invisible – no one is looking at you in the street. In a way, I feel nostalgic but at the same time, I'm still curious. This is how the mind of an artist works - endlessly producing new thoughts and ideas that seem interesting and that you want to put into practice.

AKR: Looking at the series you have produced throughout the years, I notice a cyclical aspect, same themes and same pictorial motifs, and an idea of recurrence. A retrospective offers the opportunity to highlight visual vocabularies and strategies.

EB: You don't even notice it yourself at the time, especially in the beginning. Ideas appear from outer space and you create art with an extreme naivety, in a way.

EH: It takes a large corpus of work for its inner integrity to become noticeable.

EB: I became aware of it for the first time when working on the book *Artist and Her Model* (2012). I wanted to deconstruct the chronology and proceed by thematic and formal juxtapositions. I realised that I had taken photographs with a dancer in 1998, and that in 2007 I was working with dancers of the Paris Opera. The first time, you deal with the subject innocently. The second time, you understand that it is especially interesting to you, but you don't remember that you have already worked on it. In the end, when enough time has passed, you want to do it again to see in what way it would be different from the previous attempts. In the series *12 ans après* (2011-2013), I went back to the places of my artist residency in 1999, in Chalon-sur-Saône, to my French roots. I wanted to photograph the same bedrooms and the same landscapes in order to suggest the passage of time through showing what has changed and what has not.

**Playing adult**

AKR: You use yourself as a model in your photographs. You reuse the same figure, with small variations, which makes it function as a recognisable sign. But you have used it so often that its signification is totally different from what it was the first time.

EB: I repeat the same thing for as long as possible. I become attached to one motif at a time, for example a figure seen from the back in a landscape. I wonder how many times I can show a character looking at a landscape before it is too much. Or what variants I could invent, have them face forward or add a second person maybe. After a few years, you can compare the first and the last photographs. Time travel is made real. When you are young, you can't even imagine that a time will come when you can look back and compare what you have done at different times.

AKR: This comparison might imply an empathy for the past. Returning to a time when you did not know what life would bring to you.

EB: And you can even look back with a certain amusement.

AKR: I have been really moved by the way your series *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe* (1997-1999) and *Annonciation* (2009-2013) deal with parenthood and generational transmission. Putting the old and the new series in parallel creates a strong experience that comes from knowing them both. In the early series, you photographed yourself wearing your parents' wedding clothes and your mother's funeral dress. You treated your parents' absence from the standpoint of the child. The *Annonciation* series illustrates in a very personal way the topic of childlessness. You now have the role of the parent, but the absence is still there, yet this time the child is absent.

EB: The perspective is inverted. Before, I was a child mourning her dead parents, and now I am the one who never became a parent and is mourning the absent child. On the other hand - because I have no children, I will never be totally adult either. I am an artist, which allows one to do crazy things, contrary to 'proper adults'. The older I get, the more I play. The things I'm most interested in at the moment can be done with lightness and humour, even though my work also has a serious side. This is the very essence of a game: you determine crazy rules, then you follow them.

AKR: Indeed, there must always be rules in a game. The crazier, the better. And the rules also define the world of the game.

EB: The rules can be very simple, for example a place and a defined time span: the *Maison Louis Carré* outside Paris, designed by Alvar Aalto, where I went to play for two days and a half in May 2015. The night before, I rushed and shoved clothes in my suitcase, including my grandmother's dresses from the 60s and my gym suit. I had been told where to get off the train. The guide was waiting for me there, led me to the house and gave me the keys. She showed me the kitchen, where to find bed sheets and towels, I said "Salut" and locked the door. I couldn't wait to be alone, to begin my obsessive but amusing work.

EH: Playing and art-making have that in common, you totally immerse yourself in them.

### **Autofiction**

AKR: In your first works, it is hard to know if you're playing with life in your art or with art in your life. Recently, you returned to autobiographical themes. But in between, you have worked on landscape and art historical issues. What do you think of the relationship between life and art?

EB: I think that art follows life, or that life guides art. What happens in my daily life impacts my work. In the beginning, when I was still an art student, I did autobiographical photography because there were events occurring in my life that I had to process. Such as my parents' deaths, my marriage and my divorce. Then I got interested in art history, which is natural, because I had just graduated and started to travel and to visit museums. I was assembling an iconographic stock for myself by studying the works that were an inspiration to me as an artist, and reacted to them. Later I turned to the relationship between artist and model: who is the model? Who is looking at who? What happens when the model looks back at the artist? This topic kept me busy for a long time. Then I turned 40 and life became complicated. The autobiography returned. I did not decide that but I didn't fight it back either. My strategy as an artist is to let the images come, without getting in their way. It's like a spiral: I come back to the beginning, but not exactly, because there is some distance between the starting point and the arrival point.

AKR: You have an extraordinary way of demystifying things. One of the most classical topics in art history is the relationship between autobiographical elements and their visual representation.

EB: I often had to talk about this when I produced series like *The New Painting* (2000-2004) or *Model Studies* (2002-2008). Everybody could see that it was me on the photographs. Lots of people thought that I was still telling the story of my life, but I always insisted that I wasn't. To be totally honest, I can now state that my photographs do say something about me: I was in those places and I picked them for personal reasons – even if I try to pretend that a photograph is nothing but a photograph.

AKR: You have often said that this recognisable figure in your photographs is like a word in your artistic vocabulary. I find this to be an interesting idea, considering the countless times the nude female body has been represented and analysed in art. If we consider your body as a word with a meaning that is always changing a little depending on the context, your character is perceived differently than if it was mainly considered as the shape of a woman's body or the battlefield of values and expectations.

EB: Rather than seeing my figure as a word, I would like to think of it as a polysemic sign, some kind of icon, that can be recognised but has more than one meaning. It can mean something one day, and something else the day after.

EH: When the artist engages painful topics, it's easier to imagine that the work is autobiographical.

EB: In such case, it is also more honest to say that it is autobiographical, that it reflects something that happened to me, but that I am aware has happened to many others too. I also see my *Annonciation* series as the peer support that I didn't get when undergoing years of infertility treatment that every time ended up in disaster. For the public, stories of infertility always have a happy end: as difficult as it was, it was worth it because in the end we went home with a baby. But in reality this is the case for only 25% of the treatments. I think people should know that 75% of treatments do not lead to a child being born. I am surprised to see how taboo this subject is in our society. I have received more feedback for this series than any other work. My intervention was clearly needed.

Nevertheless, when working on the book *Carpe Fucking Diem* (2015), I decided not to include any text. Nothing felt adequate, because a text would bind the pictures too strongly to a given meaning. The way it is, you can also stay on the surface and look at the photographs just as photographs, you're not forced into a story. I was lucky to meet the Dutch graphic designer Teun van der Heijden. I meant the book to only include the *Annonciation* series, but Teun insisted that the beginning and the end of the book should be open, with plenty of images before and after.

EH: I often react to your work in a very emotional way. Can you personally identify the emotions behind your photographs? Or rather, do you associate a special emotion with each photograph?

EB: It depends. Personally, I see a clear difference between my autobiographical photographs, for which I know the emotion in question, and the other ones where I appear as a model. In the latter, there is not necessarily any emotion that I could identify. It's about composing a picture with a human figure in a space, and it can represent anything you want. That's what's fun. The pictures allow all kinds of readings. When setting them up, I am the Mad Hatter and the Alice in Wonderland at the same time. It's strange, a little surreal.

AKR: In the series Annonciation and Carpe Fucking Diem (2011-2015), alongside carefully composed photographs, you introduced an iconography related to spontaneous snapshots. Going from one genre to the other creates different levels and modes of treating emotions. You add to the autobiographical aspect also through the transient quality of the snapshot. We feel that the photographs refer to a personal daily life, precisely because of the instantaneousness that is specific to snapshots.

EH: We might also be looking at emotions that are still quite unprocessed.

EB: This is the very essence of the snapshot, isn't it, you are taking a photograph at the time when everything is happening, and you can't see yet what it is...

AKR: ... or what the meaning of this instant will be.

## Landscape

EH: You say you never use an assistant, even for your landscape photographs. Instead you use a long cable release, or you run to be in the frame within the 20 seconds of the electronic self-timer. Even when shooting a landscape, most of the time you put somebody in the picture. What is the role of pure landscapes in your work?

EB: It might be physically impossible to introduce a character in some landscapes. If I want to photograph the horizon for example, the camera angle might be such that only my head would be visible at the bottom of the frame. Yet I feel many landscapes need a human presence - or are made more interesting thanks to it.

AKR: The human figure gives the viewer someone to relate to or a companion to share with.

EB: The gaze is also made more concrete: here is the view that I have chosen to look at. Welcome to join in. Sometimes a plain landscape is enough, if it has something special. But what? Often the landscapes I find interesting in themselves, empty and pure, are geometrically simple. The subject matter may be the division of the picture plain. In fact it's extremely hard to work in a rectangle. Symmetry is the most obvious way to construct the image, and you need a good reason to deviate from it.

AKR: In what way does working indoors or outdoors impact your photographs?

EB: I never work in the studio, by this I mean the closed and empty photographic studio with large lighting equipment. I prefer real places, where I frame the photograph by choosing where to place my camera and sometimes moving a few objects. There are not great spots everywhere outdoors, so it takes a lot of footwork. I like riding a bicycle, or walking, or I look at maps. If a place looks interesting on the map, I go there. My eyes crave novelty. I get bored easily and seeing the same streets all the time dulls the mind. I always get excited when discovering new places.

AKR: What pushed you to work with moving image?

EB: I have always made videos, and always been interested in them. I first tested, a long time ago, shooting still images and video of the same subject matter, a mirror on which the reflection of a face appears as the mist fades away. I noticed a big difference. The stills are like tableaux, while the video is more real – it's harder to watch. The moving image lacks the detachment introduced by a frame hanging on a wall.

EH: In what way is the moving image harder to watch?

EB: It is so realistic. I think there is less realism in photography than in moving image. In the latter, the dimension of time has a concrete existence, it shows processes. Also sound and silence play important roles. To get on with one's artistic work smoothly, it can be beneficial to look at same thematics in two different ways. I was not trained in cinema, and that's why it's easy to work with it lightly, playfully – because I do not know how it “should” be done and what the conventions are.

### **Non-standard**

EH: Your works are often considered as female art, which is strange considering that your art is not problematizing gender. I don't feel as if you're dealing with questions revolving around femininity in particular.

EB: The so-called feminine iconography feels foreign to me. I don't go around thinking every day that I'm a woman and someone else is a man. I am not interested in it and that is not a question I meditate on. Reality, for me, is what I see. The reality of the body is irrelevant.

AKR: Despite what you are saying, I think it is really beneficial for many young talents that you are a role model, a woman photographer, even though it is not the central theme of your work – or maybe for that very reason. And although you yourself consider your gender irrelevant, it might not be the same for the viewer. Inevitably, some signs are more charged than others, and a naked female body is still a very charged one.

EH: And – obviously – the appearance of the body that we choose to use as a sign also has an impact on the photographs.

EB: That's probably true. If it looked like the American ideal...

EH: ...then it would be easier to interpret it as a comment on womanhood.

EB: And there's also the fact that I find myself totally ok. I remember the first time I made a self-portrait in my student times: a nude that I meant to use in my visit card. When I saw the contact print, I thought: oh my god, I can't use this, this is too awful: skinny and bony, small breasts and a peculiar face, really non-standard. I was 24 at the time. Nowadays, I couldn't be more comfortable with my appearance. It's a question of getting used to it, because you're looking at your own image over and over again. It's really fortunate.

Data source: Essays — Elina Brotherus (<http://www.elinabrotherus.com/texts>)