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Measuring and Stripping Bare

On The Day of the Painter (1997), a film by Werner Nekes

The film begins with a sequence of painted time. In a peculiar, meditative presentation, a collage is built up of barely identifiable images of naked women, in alienating colours, layered one upon the other... as if viewed through a chaotic kaleidoscope. Then, Suddenly, a jarringly sharp image of an artifact of art and media history: one of the most distinctive sketches from Albrecht Dürer's well-known *Underweyssung der Messung* of 1525, which is quoted time and again whenever the topic being discussed is central perspective and symbolic form. Nekes barely touches the surface of the sketch, but rather leaves it, for the most part, as it is. The camera pans away horizontally. A painter with a walrus moustache and somewhat unkempt hair is sitting bolt upright in an intense state of attention at the right end of a long, heavy wooden table. He is gazing with his right eye through the monocular site of a drawing apparatus. The pencil in his right hand rests on a sheet of paper which is divided into a grid exactly like the grid strung on a wooden frame that is standing on the table. The grid is in the centre of the screen between the painter on the right and his model on the left end of the screen. On the other side of the grid is the voluptuous, nearly naked body of a woman her head resting on a pile of presumably soft pillows at the opposite end of the table from the painter. For the viewer of the sketch, only the profile of her face is visible, and her eyes are shut. From the painter's perspective through the grid, her slightly open thighs are at an angle, not aimed directly at him. The knees are bent, the left one slightly higher. Her left hand is holding a cloth at the inside of her left calf, which covers her right leg and her pubis, as well as her entire right arm.

What is the painter seeing through this apparatus, what could he possibly be feeling? Is he even interested in the beauty of the body across the table from him? Does he smell it? Does he sense its presence? Is he imagining how it tastes? Does he desire it? Is the other body something sensational to the painter, or is his concentrated attention exclusively dedicated to the realization of the aesthetic goal of this special artistic act, i.e., precise two dimensional representation in symbolic form according to the Euclidean geometry?

"I am, by no means, painting a woman", said Henri Matisse, "I am painting a picture".

There is a planned sequence at the end of the film which consists of 'a single unvarying shot. Werner Nekes places a beautiful young woman in a reclined position, giving the camera a view reminiscent of the image presented in Gustave Courbet's famous 1866 painting *The Origin of the World* (*L'origine du Monde*): The legs at an angle, the thighs open, in the slightly lowered center of the frame the triangle of her pubic hair. But Nekes differentiates his image from Courbet's in several important ways. In the famous work of art, the model is allowed to remain anonymous. The body of Courbet's nascent woman has no face. It's just a trunk bearing the genitals. A cloth, that starts above her right breast, covers her left breast and continues as an obscuring veil into the space outside the frame, emphasizing additionally the disinterest in the individuality of the model. In the film, the young woman's body is cut off at the lower part of the leg by the frame, but the film speaks for her unparalleled beauty, in that it gives us a view of the head that goes with the pubis. Courbet's origin of the world comes out of a dark, nearly black background. Nekes sets his scene in the out of doors: it is light, it is open and free.

And most of all: the frame does not stand still. Only after the beautiful young woman closes her eyes, does the observing gaze begin to wander downward. Her left hand moves to her left

breast and with a little hesitation, lays itself there. Her right hand glides slowly, gropingly across her body to her vulva. With her fingers, she spreads the lips and begins to masturbate. This shot lasts approximately four minutes, without a single cut. The woman visibly brings herself to a climax. One can see it as momentary tightening of her body and a brief shuddering of the image. The reel is over and, with that, *The Day of the Painter*. The credits follow abruptly. This final sequence is simultaneously beautiful and irritating. The masturbating woman obviously knows of the presence of the third mechanical eye between her and the potential public. At first glance she seems totally detached, giving herself over completely to the pleasure with her eyes closed. But with nearly every motion of her body, with every expression on her face, and with the always hesitant movement of her hands, she also demonstrates that she is framed by a motion picture. Tension/concentration and ease, calculation and insubstantiality are densely superimposed one upon the other in this staging of autoeroticism as the director's unique interpretation of *The Origin of the World*. It casts the feminine principal not in the function of child-bearing, but as the medium of desire. This sequence is the only one in the entire film in which Nekes allows the 35mm film to act purely on its own, without manipulating the surfaces and without interfering with the course of time. That which Dürer's painter saw with his left eye, or perhaps even with the eye of his imagination - the genitals of the woman as an object of desire - is allowed to fall onto the side of the clearly visible. He makes it open accessibly. Between the opening scene and the final climax, the day of the painter unfolds, which in this case is the day of the filmmaker. Legions of painters, sculptors and photographers have grappled with the riddles presented to them by the sketches of Dürer, Rubens, da Vinci, Cigoli. Or they have each in their own fashion tried to approach the secrets of "the other's" body, often directly connected to Courbet's *Origin of the World*: Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (Nekes devotes one of the longest and most beautiful sequences in the film to this image of a nude woman with an upright oil lamp in her left hand), Fontana's *Femme nue couchée*, Fischl's *Bad Boy*, Balthus' *La Chambre*, Noritoshi Hirakawa's *The Pandora* that is Pandora's Box, as well as a few women artists, such as Cindy Sherman in her photo-sculpture *Untitled #263*, in which a female and a male torso are bound together with a ribbon, while their severed heads lie next to them (a reversal of Hans Bellmer's *La Poupée*, of which he made many variations between 1938 and 1949). These attempts to unveil this secret through aesthetic means had to and will have to remain in vain and end in paradoxes, since the desire to include the unshowable in an image leads, again and again, to veiling and disguising. During the time Courbet's famous painting was in his possession, Jacques Lacan made this into a topic through a private staging. He had asked André Masson, who had illustrated Bataille's *The Story of the Eye* (*L'Histoire de l'Œil*), to prepare a painter's sketch, in which the contours of Courbet's painting can be dimly perceived, as if in a negative. He placed this sketch, which was in the same format as the original, as a veiling layer in front of the painting. If one opened the side of the frame and removed the Masson sketch, one revealed the origin of the world, but one encountered, once again, an imaginary construct of it, and had to be satisfied with the painting *L'origine du monde*. Nekes orbits around an entire circle of diverse disguises and aesthetic veiling and unveiling strategies for viewing, in long, unhurried sequences. In the process, he employs all the tools of his experience with film technology, visualization technologies, cinematography itself, and his recent experience with electronic devices. Simple scenes of amateurishly portrayed female nudity before the camera are placed on a grid, (as in the instructional image by Dürer), crosshatched, broken up diagonally (as in Fischl's painting) and put back together again, pointillized, over and underexposed, distorted in colour, layered, disintegrated to the point of two-dimensional abstraction, altered through fantastic masks making them only dimly discernible for the viewer, or alienated through extreme camera angles: as in, for instance, a long sequence, in which a Hi-8 camera is bound to a woman's right foot, which places the moving woman in an extreme perspective and presents a crazy picture for the perception. For

this film, Nekes used the entire range of contemporary visual recording technology: from the classic 3,5mm, to 16mm as well as electronic recording devices of various types. His postproduction techniques were similarly diverse. All the material (with the exception of the final sequence) was digitalized and processed with image-manipulation software. What emerges is a dense cinematic concentrate of potential aesthetification techniques, as well as a discourse on some of the practices of distancing, trivialization, glorification, and veiling, in the artistic struggle with the unparalleled sensation of "Frau Werden" (becoming a woman), which have been possible up to now and might be possible in the future.

The result of Nekes' radical concentration of the material of his film is that he tears the traditional concept of the film wide open: looking back toward the past with the reference to practices of the distant past for playfully and subversively deviating from the verdict of the representative image, as well as looking into the future of the motion picture as a construct with seemingly endlessly changeable material. The Day of the Painter shifts with authority between painting, photography, cinematography, and electronic image-making and manipulation. Just as he is not prepared to recognize the borders between these artistic disciplines, he also oscillates between the media genres of documentary, staged presentation and simulation. Even in his radical finale, a question is begged: what manner of truth is embodied in the masturbative film act, the masculine/quantifying presumption, or the liberation of being stripped bare? A question that can only be answered by the perceptions of each individual viewer. The motion picture incorporates ambivalence.

The film abandons dialogue, with the exception of the worried question of the protagonist with the camera harnessed to her foot, as to whether there aren't perhaps snakes in the forest. The music of Anthony Moore, with whom Nekes has worked for many years, the last time in his series Media Magica, adds strength to the discursive dimension of the film, in that it he experiments with putting rhythm and instrumentation to the story and layers of the imagery that callously veils our view of the possible origin of the World. This is and remains a project of the imaginative faculties, and not a matter of visual and acoustic artifacts. But sometimes artistic efforts help us - as does this film by Werner Nekes - to more successfully unfurl these mysteries.

(Translated from the original German by Theo Hoffmann)