

MOUSSE



* Available in the international edition and for subscription only.

Torbjorn Redland, Tricolor no.2, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and STANDARD (OSLO), Oslo

Mousse Magazine #42 February - March 2014

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FOLDING THE PERIPHERY

Tales of weirdos, bizarros and people just like us. The photographs of Torbjørn Rødland are strange and ugly, they are repulsive, perhaps perverted and disgusting, somewhat unpleasant and yet they are also familiar, pretty and attractive, simple and ordinary, maybe even erotic yet straightforwardly normal. We are caught in a rare mix of reactions, warm and intriguing, cold and captivating, giving us shivers and comfort at the same time. Everyday items and situations at their most surreal and grotesque, beauties and beasts, terror and tranquility. Uncanny, eerie and perverted transformations. The gloss of a contemporary fashion magazine and the horrors of Hieronymus Bosch next to one another, hand in hand, face to face. Northern Gothic lens sketches.

An octopus wrapped around a person's hand. Facial mask made of plastic over a

woman's face. Red haired boy with marker strips on his shoulder and a broken arm. In a forest with hands wearing sneakers. Pair of legs bound together with string. Another body, sideways, gymnastics with the head against the wall, bleeding. High heel, leg and paint. Elbow pads on the floor. Syrup and napkins on the ground. Long dark hair, red and black ribbons, a beautiful girl and a pool. Black paper, white fabric and a bug. Is this here to grab out attention, fascinate and shock us on the level of the eye or are we looking at a fantastic world of true bizarreness hidden underneath our gardens, streets and houses and inside the depths of our souls and bodies? Is this what we will become or where we came from? Caricatures of ourselves or the real us?

Jens Hoffmann

BY LUCAS BLALOCK

LUKAS BLALOCK

A lot of photography of late has been concerned with the photograph itself as an object. I was wondering if this is something you think about?

TORBJØRN RØDLAND

I do think about it, but ultimately I see myself as more of an image-maker. In my BA program in Bergen [Norway] in the early to mid-1990s there was full focus on self-conscious and referential pictures. I had read cultural studies and was already on board. Feminist and post-modern photography was the first contemporary art that really made sense to me, but I also longed for an image that didn't close in on itself or its referential category. Without regressing to a simpler worldview, I wanted my photography to also be about something other than itself. I wanted to engage with the world. That was my project from the beginning. The will to reengage was always a drive and a need for more complexity.

LB When I was thinking about our conversation this question felt like some sort of red herring, but hearing your answer, it is obvious that of course you consider the works through their objecthood. However—and maybe this is why it felt so alien to me in the asking—this object-



hood isn't the first place I want to locate the work in your pictures, though it is obviously part of the constellation. I instead want to think about relationships: within pictures/out there, between pictures, between content and material, to history, etc. Is this something like what you mean by complexity?

TR Well, pluralism was already established. Being open to fifty quotable voices seemed liberating and limiting in equal measure. Acknowledging the culturally coded and interpretive side of perception is a start, but I

was looking for a position that was even more inclusive, and thereby more layered than pluralism.

Isn't evolution always a movement towards more complex forms? Walker Evans was carried forward by Sherrie Levine, who through appropriation added questions and layers to his work. As a student, Levine's *After Walker Evans* made a lot of sense to me, but it also seemed unrepeatable. To move forward, I began to integrate qualities dismissed by postmodern photography, and adding what I found missing in Jeff Wall, who was another early influence. I opened up to lyricism and cuteness, and I tried to integrate the sensuality of the photographic moment.

LB Photography as medium; as a field of materialized thinking that can be considered, mined and expanded (like painting) is really important to me. I see this as a condition that Jeff Wall's writings and work really helped to develop, but also one that, as you said, leaves a lot of as yet un-territorialized space.

I want to ask about sensuality in the way you are using it. Your work often gets grouped with practitioners whose pictures draw on commercial situations, but your pictures really reject this logic, at least if we spend time with them. Furthermore, this doesn't seem to me to be the sensuality you mean. We have talked a little before about Minor White and others who have developed photographies outside of "documentary" style, or at least documentary intention, but not in line with commercial practice either. Can you say some more about this?

TR Minor White to me has come to represent both the failure and the achievements of old school art photography. He picked up and ran with Stieglitz's most sophisticated idea: photographic abstraction—photography with an unresolved indexicality—as a mirror image of individual spiritual life. Minor White was trying to figure himself out. He struggled with guilt over his sexual attraction to men. He questioned his faith. With the rise of Conceptual Art in the 1960s and 1970s White gradually lost relevance. His work deteriorated. After his death in the mid-1970s, Minor White's aesthetic lived on in camera clubs, trivialized and obsolete. White wrote about the need to get free of surface, texture and form. The only tool he believed in was paradox. He famously talked about working the camera as a metamorphosing machine.

LB I like the metamorphosing machine against the more common description of one that indexes. I have been thinking a lot myself about photography as a drawing machine; drawing being a means to understand, bring closer, or quite literally be able to picture, which might sort of split the difference. I have read before that you moved away from an early interest in drawing to pursue photography. Does this description of photography through drawing have resonance for you? And do you think about the apparatus so directly in your own work?

TR As a teenager I made money drawing for newspapers. Maybe for that reason I've focused more on differences than similarities between drawing and photography, but a love for vertical lines and figurative detail runs through both practices. One quality that drew me to photography was a paradoxical sense of inner life, something my drawings never had. Depending on cameras for very specific aesthetic qualities, I'm afraid I don't think about them very much.

LB That seems perfectly fair, but I think I am really trying to ask something else. Let me try this way. When David Lynch made *Inland Empire*

all he would tell Laura Dern (the film's star) about the plot was that it was about "a woman in trouble." It was shot piecemeal and out of order over several years and the whole time she had very little sense of how it was going to come together. There is something of that kind of involvement here—a mystery more than a puzzle. Lynch's filmmaking has obviously been really inventive, structurally—Robert Blake being on both ends of the phone in *Lost Highway*, for example—but asking a question about how, or with what intentions, a strange thing has been made feels totally reductive, especially when the technical elements are easily discernable. The complexity in your pictures (and their inner life) has this same elusive relationship to language.

TR You're right. Technically this is optical-chemical photography. And I both feel and think my way through it. It is part mystery and part puzzle. I don't know if anyone who saw the solo I did at Albus Greenspon in New York last year consciously picked up on the theme of dual unity, but in the show there were a lot of doubles internally bound together. The brain-like avocado consists of an upper and a lower half. The male kabuki actor does a female character. The Starbucks siren has two tails. The two Ducati girls together represent one person, I think. Two walls meet in a corner and crumble, and so on. Other single images were built in the camera as two separate exposures onto a single sheet of negative film. I typically discover themes or patterns like these in retrospect. They can guide the compiling of an exhibition or the sequencing of a book, but more seldom the making of a photograph.

LB What does tend to guide your picture making?

TR It's vague. I get excited about an object, a face, a place, a picture, an arrangement, a conceivable constellation. I wonder what I can make it mean if I stay with it, look at it, go to work on it. I want to know what's so interesting about the image of that thing I'm seeing clearly but cannot quite grasp intellectually. I'm curious as to *how* it will mean. I also study pictorial spaces, something I should have mentioned when you brought up the camera. I look at the difference between long and short lenses. Every picture I can make with a wide-angle lens is a triumph. I have very few, less than ten in total, and that's over a period of more than fifteen years. I always want to make more.

Are you familiar with an artist's note from the mid-1960s where Gerhard Richter accounts for his practice of making painted copies of photographs? It's because photographs and their viewers only care for facts, he writes, and it's very hard to turn a photograph into a *picture* simply by declaring it to be one. In its original context I think this straw man argument is forgivable. Admittedly, I have similar issues with wide-angle photography. I know it's time to fully embrace it, but it is difficult to make a *picture* through a short lens. It's no coincidence that Richard Prince's early "Cowboys" are looked at through a very long lens.

LB It is funny you say that. I have been working with not a truly short but a shorter lens lately, and it is a totally different problem to solve. You look around instead of looking at...

I want to return to something you said earlier though. When you were talking about White, you said that he carried on Stieglitz's most

sophisticated idea in his work: that of a photograph with an unresolved indexicality. This channeling of White and art photography makes me think of Walter Benjamin, who says something about how anything that doesn't have a toehold in the culture of the present will be lost to history. In a way the action is one of folding in the periphery. I know your work has been talked about in the past through the perverse—which I like—but I want to also talk about it as polyamorous.

TR Polyamorous sounds like an inverted take on the integrative principle I've hinted at. It's one thing to spread yourself out in a web of scattered objects or perspectives, but it's another to bring separate categories, voices and viewpoints into a personal unity and address them as such. Maybe the latter is the true folding in of the periphery.

LB A few years ago you wrote twenty "Sentences on Photography" for Triple Canopy. (I have read them many times and they ring resoundingly true!) The sentences are both assertive and circular, almost Beckett-like; the photograph (reductive, mute, distant, lacking) becomes an unbearable constraint nonetheless tolerated, almost optimistically. It is a certain kind of project—to stick with a thing though you are so aware of its limits and failures. It becomes a discipline in the classic sense. Speaking of lovers, your last book from MACK was called *Vanilla Partner*, which refers of course to an initiate to a different field of constraints.

TR When you talk about sticking around I think marriage. I have never been married except to the medium of photography, but maybe this is the situation after a while: partners don't know for sure who's influencing and perverting whom. Even though I'm probably taking my straight medium to places it would never go without a forceful push, it often feels like it's the other way round; as if photography had a strong will of its own. When there's so much it cannot do, it really wants me to stop being timid and try that other thing, you know, beyond what we have already tried. The medium is older and more experienced. It knows itself. It repeatedly takes me out of my comfort zone.

LB I am thinking about all the fluids in your pictures and Jeff Wall's idea that digital expands the "dry" space of photography, which he equates with control; the wet being the living, breathing world. In your work it is very hard to forget about the body, that one is looking from the body, and all of these fluids really reinforce an experience that wants to bring in the other senses. Is your interest in a "straight medium" related to questions of body and control?

TR One of the qualities I appreciate in Courbet is how weighty and bodily his bodies are. I also like to look at century-old photographs of physical mediums with ectoplasm. Wanting to bring in other senses I think is exactly right. As you say, photography can be technical and dry. It suits a person who likes cleanliness. I'm also attracted to this rawer and less controllable quality where you never really know how anything will turn out, but there's this juice, this presence. I still prefer the originals I produce to be physical pieces of plastic coming out of a bath, rather than digital files backed up on two hard drives. There's something beautiful about life rising from liquids.

Storie di gente stramba ed eccentrica, gente come noi. Le fotografie di Torbjørn Rødland sono strane e forse brutte, sgradevoli, perverse e disgustose, o addirittura ripugnanti, e tuttavia sono anche familiari, belle e affascinanti, semplici e ordinarie, persino erotiche e al contempo perfettamente normali. Ci troviamo prigionieri di un raro caleidoscopio di emozioni, calde e intriganti, fredde e seducenti, che sanno darci i brividi e farci sentire a nostro agio. Oggetti e situazioni della quotidianità all'apice del surreale e del grottesco, belle e bestie, terrore e tranquillità. Trasformazioni misteriose, sinistre e conturbanti. Gli orrori di Hieronymus Bosch e la copertina patinata di una rivista di moda accostati gli uni all'altra, mano nella mano, faccia a faccia. Disegni di lenti tardo gotiche. I tentacoli di un polpo intorno alla mano di un uomo. Una maschera di plastica sul volto di una donna. Un bambino dai capelli rossi con segni di pennarello sulla spalla e un braccio rotto. In un

bosco, con le scarpe da ginnastica alle mani. Un paio di gambe avvolto da un filo. Un altro corpo, di lato, che fa ginnastica con la testa poggiata al muro, sangue. Tacchi alti, gambe e vernice. Gomitiere sul pavimento. Sciropo e fazzoletti sparsi per terra. Lunghi capelli scuri, nastri neri e rossi, una bella ragazza e uno stagno. Carta nera, stoffa bianca e uno scarafaggio.

È lì per attirare la nostra attenzione, per affascinarci e turbarci a livello visivo, o stiamo forse osservando un mondo fantastico di autentica stravaganza celato sotto i giardini, le strade e le case, e nelle profondità delle nostre anime e dei nostri corpi? È ciò che diventeremo o quello da cui proveniamo? Sono caricature o ritratti di noi stessi?

Jens Hoffmann

by Lucas Blalock

Lucas Blalock: Ultimamente la fotografia si è molto concentrata sulla figura del fotografo come oggetto. Mi chiedo se anche tu sei interessato a questa prospettiva.

Torbjørn Rødland: Sì, è una concezione che mi interessa, anche se ultimamente mi vedo più come un creatore di immagini. I corsi universitari che ho seguito a Bergen [Norvegia] durante i primi anni '90 erano soprattutto imperniati su un genere autoreferenziale di fotografia. Io avevo letto molti te-

sti di cultural studies e in quel periodo stavo già lavorando. La fotografia femminista e quella post-moderna sono state le prime ad aver davvero avuto senso per me, ma desideravo anche produrre un'immagine che non si richiudesse su se stessa o intorno alla propria categoria di riferimento. Senza regredire in una visione del mondo troppo semplificata, volevo che la mia fotografia fosse qualcosa d'altro oltre a se stessa. Volevo impegnarmi nel mondo. Questo è sempre stato il mio progetto, sin dall'inizio. La volontà di impegnarmi, oltre ad avermi sempre spronato, ha acceso in me il bisogno di maggiore complessità.

LB: Ripensando alla nostra conversazione, questa domanda mi sembrava quasi una pista falsa, ma ascoltando ora la tua risposta è evidente che valuti le tue opere per la loro oggettività. Ciononostante – e forse è per questo che la domanda mi sembrava un po' fuori luogo – l'oggettività non è la prima categoria in cui collocherei le tue opere, anche se naturalmente essa rientra nella tua costellazione. Vorrei invece parlare di rapporti: tra l'immagine e il mondo là fuori, tra un'immagine e l'altra, tra contenuto e materiale, con la storia, eccetera. È questo che intendi con complessità?





















