Marjolein Rothman: The Gaze

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"When I learn to speak, I am inserted into systems of discourse that were there before I was, and will remain after I am gone. Similarly when I learn to see socially, that is, when I begin to articulate my retinal experience with the codes of recognition that come to me from my social milieu(s), I am inserted into systems of a visual discourse that saw the world before I did, and will go on seeing after I see no longer".[1]

Seeing is basically socially determined. To see or observe is not the straight forward, unmediated experience that one might presume, but the act of seeing is deeply influenced by a series of social codes, that consciously and mostly unconsciously affect the way we look at things, the way we see and experience the world around us. Our visual experiences are profoundly influenced by our culture, gender, language and social position to name a few, and the influence takes place on a level that is beyond the control of the single individual. It is so to speak a visual "a priori" – something one cannot escape or set oneself apart from.
Marjolein Rothman's new body of work entitled *Gaze* is, more than anything, about visuality as a social construct. Her work presents an on-going investigation of the act of looking or gazing.
A "gaze" is generally understood as a long and fixed look. But "The Gaze" also has a long theoretical discourse attached to it as a psycho-analytical term. The discursive "gaze" is used to describe a visuality which is socially pre-determined, as for instance the "male gaze" discussed in feminist film theory. The discursive "gaze" is not to be understood as an individual activity as such, but describes a dynamic relationship of power. And it is especially the social implications of the gaze – understood as a visual relationship between the individual and the world – that Rothman's work touches onto and examines on different levels.

Characteristically for Rothman the figurative content of her images is presented with very few means. The acrylic paintings and gouaches are composed of thin, transparent layers of few, but precise wide brushstrokes, which form a graphic pattern of light and shade. Rothman's equally scarce use of colours underlines the ephemeral and fading character of the images, which look like overexposed photographs or images that were left too long in the sun, so that the light had burned out the lightest patches of the picture leaving only the darkest areas visible. In Rothman's own words her work is the result of a "visual note taking". Rothman's source of material is historical

photographs, which she “re-presents” or paraphrases in a reduced, “incomplete” or fragmentized form that resembles silhouette cuttings and that prompts the viewer's eye to fill in the blank spaces. In fact, Rothman's new work includes pure paper cut-outs, but mostly the photographic image is transferred to painting on canvas or a mix of gouache and paper collage. Rothman's “note taking” is often repeated many times over, presenting several different “takes” or views of the same image.

The new series of work presents a continuation of Rothman's representation of mainly female characters. But different from her earlier portraits – i.e. her series *Iconography I* of famous female saints – the new work introduces a seemingly more anonymous cast. They are all presented in full figure and performing different poses like that of a traditional gymnastics exercise in *Circle I* and *II*, the working pose of factory women in overalls in *Construct*, posing with a gun in *Richter* or a bow and arrow in *Target*, shooting with a camera in *Shot*, or simply just posing for the sake of it as in the collage series *Exercises*.
For this new collage series Rothman photographed her alter ego performing a series of successive poses against a white wall in her studio, which give the impression of frozen movement and evoke Eadweard Muybridge's famous motion study photography. This is especially the case with the piece *Exercise III* which shows the female model going up and down a small staircase, a well known motion study exercise which possibly served as a source for Marcel Duchamp‘s modernist classic *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2 (Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2)* from 1912. The strange dynamic of the black and white “motion photographs” is underlined by pieces of coloured paper cut-outs that – almost like an extra-terrestrial force seem to interact with the person posing, as if both elements shared the same time and space. Sometimes the abstract paper elements work against the movement of the person and press her down, while at other times they seem to reinforce and extend her movements, as if Rothman was trying to visualize an aesthetic struggle between the concepts of abstraction and figuration, as different ways or “beliefs” of artistic expression.
The abstract elements stress the female body as an object. Interacting with the abstract paper cut-outs the body invariably turns into pure form or pure material. Rothman's alter ego engages with the architecture of the wall and staircase to underline the objectified status of the body much in line with feminist performance photography of, for instance, Francesca Woodman and VALIE EXPORT. Rothman’s collages bring in particular VALIE EXPORT's photographic series called Körperkonfigurationen in der Architektur (Body Configurations) 1972-1982 to mind. In her performance series EXPORT physically inscribes her body in the – often monumental – architecture of Vienna, as a subtle and poetic questioning of dominant social codes associated with the female body. In Rothman's case however, the body is adapting to the form of abstract elements, rather than to architecture.

The abstract “turn” in the collage series becomes evident in Rothman's *Paper Sculpture* series. The acrylic painting series *Paper Sculpture I, II, IV* and *V* are all based on the same photograph of a modernist paper sculpture that was exhibited in 1956 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in an iconic exhibition titled *This is Tomorrow.* The focus of the exhibition was “the modern way of living” and the pieces in the show were based on a collaborative art practice involving artists, designers, architects and theorists. The paper sculpture was a three-dimensional “translation” of a series of photographic studies of soap bubbles.
Rothman found the installation view in the exhibition catalogue accompanying the show, and painted the sculpture again and again, focusing on different details and displaying the sculpture from different angles. As the titles suggest, there were more versions, than the four which the artist chose to exhibit. Even though the single pieces are very different in their composition – like a series of sketches some seem more complete than others – it is still possible to recognize the paper sculpture that serves as the “original” form and common denominator for the series. Despite the fact that the original three-dimensional shape is cut up in details and spread out on a flat surface in different compositions, Rothman manages to capture the aesthetic essence of the modernistic shape in each of the works as they become “visual derivatives” of a modernistic archetype.

Although the *Paper Sculpture* series presents a new level of abstraction in Rothman’s work, they are not so entirely different from her older work. Rather, they seem to form a natural continuation of her figurative work. The fragmented style of her figurative work, presenting her motives defigured by a pattern of light and shade, is basically just taken one step further. Even though the white areas in Rothman's figurative work carry an important role – formal as well as content wise – the whiteness is still mainly working as “negative space” defined as the space surrounding a figure. Whereas in the *Paper Sculpture* series the whiteness has become “upgraded” and works on an equal level with the grey tones of the images, making it hard for the viewer to tell if the left-out spaces belong to the object or its surroundings.
In the small collages bearing the iconic modernistic label of “Untitled”, the negative and positive spaces are even completely inverted. Here the positive space forming an abstract composition is constructed from paper cut-outs that were originally left-overs from the *Exercise* series and hence represent the negative space of another work. The modernistic reference – and slight mocking hereof – is furthermore underlined by a grey framing which mimics a Bauhaus aesthetic.

Juggling with light versus shadow, negative versus positive spaces, two-dimensionality versus three-dimensionality Rothman's abstract work

plays with the eye and perception of the viewer. But so does her new figurative work, albeit in a different way. Instead of using the classical portrait format of earlier work, Rothman presents her protagonists in a pre-occupied state or pose: they are mostly looking at something. And that "something" is almost always not visible to the viewer – either as a blank abstract space left within the frame or something beyond the frame: As for instance the painting *Richter*, which shows the daughter of the famous German painter Gerhard Richter, who is aiming her gun at a point beyond the frame. Besides referring to a judge the German word "Richter" also - in the derivative form of "Richten"- refers to the act of aiming at or addressing something. In the original photograph Richter's daughter Betty – who he has often used as a model – is aiming her gun at a piece of his while the painter is watching.

What is particularly striking in Rothman's new body of work is the fact that the viewer is not confronted with a person looking back, but finds herself – or himself – in the role of an observer, observing people without their knowledge. Directing her protagonists away from the viewer – faces turned away or blanked out – Rothman's new series of works consequently call on the gaze of the viewer. The general content of people looking at something also points to the status of the viewer – as an observer or voyeur, looking at art or the act of perceiving in general. The viewer is looking at people looking or rather gazing at people gazing. Rothman's work inevitably confronts the viewer with his or her perceiving role in an exhibition context.
But Rothman's work seems to represent another gaze, a gaze which belongs neither to the depicted characters nor a potential viewer. Her work reveals the gaze of the photographer as well as that of the camera – as a mechanical bodiless eye – the gaze that produced the image Rothman is working from. Even when the photographic material is physically absent in Rothman's work, it still bears clear evidence of a photographic origin. Photographs have an uncanny way of – in symbolical terms – possessing and objectifying the human body, and that mechanical gaze dominates Rothman's work in general – not only the photographic collage series *Exercises*. Rothman's images carry the nostalgic trace of old photographs, of human bodies frozen in time.
And last but not least there is the gaze of the artist, who defigures and frames her material to present a certain kind of visual reality. The small gouache piece *Gaze*, which shares its title with the exhibition, seems to be an attempt to literally illustrate the socialized aspects of vision in Rothman's work. Grey lines of brushstrokes coming from the head of the depicted woman seem to illustrate her gaze. But the same grey lines are also approaching the figure from behind. The lines could simply depict her shadow, but they could also suggest the presence of another gaze, a presence which the woman might or might not be aware of. As if the watcher herself is being watched and the world is looking back at the observer.

The concept of the gaze is a dynamic concept, and Rothman's new body of work is all about action and movement. The gaze is also a question of power. The one who sees, is the one in control. Rothman's protagonists seem to be in power or subjected to power. Although the titles such as *Shot*, *Target* and *Construction* mainly suggests the first. The act of taking control and gaining power is especially evident in *Richter,* depicting a model "shooting" a father figure and painter icon. Rothman is here also questioning an aesthetic control, understood as the power to create something – which eventually could be art. Some of her characters are even directly engaged in an aesthetic production of either an exhibition or an artwork as in the paper cut-outs *Exhibition* and *The assistant (to Matisse)*.
But the dynamic tension in Rothman's work is also rooted in an existential struggle or doubt as to whether it is possible to say something, when everything seems to have been said already. The almost cartoony struggle between abstraction and figuration in the *Exercise* series captures an essential struggle in the work of Rothman. The ironic distance to her material as she mimics and mocks modernist aesthetics, cuts up her images to put them together in new ways, the way she repeats the same image over and over again, revealing some things and hiding others, all testify to a general doubt as to how it is at all possible to create new meaning. This is not to say that Rothman is taking a purely ironic stance towards her subject matter. She is rather taking a step back to analyse and deconstruct her ideals. One could say that Rothman is trying to fight a visual a priori, trying to work around the fact that, as an artist, she is invariably "inserted into systems of a visual discourse", which in the end is a questioning of subjectivity and identity.
The defiguration and ultimately dematerialization of her work and subjectivity seems to culminate in *After Image*, which is a negative projection of her alter ego from the *Exercise* series standing on small steps facing the wall. As a ghostly apparition the alter ego is presented only in the form of negative space.

Marjolein Rothman's struggle is a romantic struggle driven by the ultimate fear of not being able to express anything at all – as she states: "In the painting I am always looking for ways of leaving out as much as I can. Sometimes I am afraid there will be nothing left, that I will be left with the white canvas".

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[1] Bryson, Norman, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field" in Vision and Visuality, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle, 1988, p. 92.
Bryson is here referring to Jacques Lacan's understanding of "The Gaze".