

## THE STRUGGLE AND THE SELF

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Some nights I wake abruptly from a terrifying dream. In the dark, I am a body without words; abandoned to an inconstant world of sounds and images. I am in a grey area. The objects around me seem threatening and unfamiliar. An abyss yawns inside me, but is gradually covered up as the bedroom regains its shape. Here is my sleeping companion, the bed, the lamp, the closet, the blinds. I am back; I can sleep again.

In moments like these, I am a stranger to myself. Primitive neural networks flare up in shifting constellations of unbridled fear, rage and desire. By day, these forces lie dormant in most of us. We are citizens of the social democracy, liberal humanists and economically rational agents. We manage ourselves and allow ourselves to be managed. But not even in a highly modern, thoroughly regulated society like Norway does the daylight last 24 hours. The well-adjusted and disciplined self is tested. This happens under pressure, when we have been offended or betrayed, when we are intoxicated, or in certain phases of sleep. I am not identical to myself over time. My relationship to violence exemplifies this. My actual experiences with violence as an adult have filled me with disgust. However, there are moments where I am drawn to violence. The nightmare and sudden

awakening are reminders that both the self and our self control shift. There are layers of the psyche where other rules apply. At certain times, in certain states, my desires are not those I admit to, and experience tells me that I am not alone in this.

One of the functions of culture is to offer arenas for questioning and satisfying troublesome parts of our existence. Today, many audiovisual forms of expression address themselves directly to our narcissistic needs. We are pampered like kings and queens through the ever-increasing immediacy of things and experiences. We are reminded that might makes right, and that through identification with the images we become the mighty. In sports, we find just such a well-developed fascist iconography. In conventional sports photography, imaginary identities characterised by physical strength and aggressive willpower are created. Archaic ideals of violent action are alive and active. It is simply not the case that modernity and humanism have displaced the heathen warrior ethos. It lives on in the entertainment industry, in various subcultures and in the far reaches of the individual minds. Perhaps stories and pictures allow us to enact unacknowledged aspects of our own self? Perhaps touching your own dark side is important? It might be a vitalising force, helping us to acknowledge that we *are* like that; that we also sometimes want these things. I want to be a big body. I want to fight. I want to force an opponent into submission in the ring. There is pleasure in yielding to these fantasies, however socially unacceptable they might be.

Another method for approaching Kausland's photography is to attempt to look beyond the

violence. There is something more there. People in extreme situations, pushing towards their own limits and against those of others. I am a witness to something I can't quite name, something immediate and powerful. These bodies are encircled by many levels of power and meaning, from the rules of the sport to the existential dictates of the neo-liberal economy. But in the ring it is not about this. There is something uncomplicated about the force of a closed-fist punch, or the glistening, bloody stripe, running down the face and neck and chest from a cut above the eye. The heaving for breath, the weight of the opponent. Arms and legs and bodies governed by quick, animal intelligence. Post-modern people easily feel abstract and unreal. We seek a kind of presence, moments where we through dedicated action are fully absorbed in the here and now. The principle of just doing what one does; no past, no future, no evaluation or reflection: it appeals to us. What is done is subordinate. One could sit and breathe, saw wood and carry water, or fight. In such states, technique and discipline is not something forced and alienating, but rather a pre-condition for the relaxed freedom in the moment that any master demonstrates.

In the pure moment, our grandiose fantasies are subverted, but so are our common perceptions of identity. The culturally prescribed identity still carries ideals of cohesion over time, clear demarcation of the boundary to others and a goal-oriented realisation of personal projects. Thus, life becomes a question of control; control of one self and the surroundings. In presence in the moment, on the other hand, there is an acceptance of personal unimportance, of not being able

to control everything. Victory and loss are illusory states. What matters is being and doing. At the same time, there is a darker side to this protest against the self. Beyond the wish for imposing our will onto others, and beyond the longing for pure presence, we find the idea of a more radical transgression. Somewhere in us, there is a pull towards the confirmation of the centrifugal forces of existence: the squandering of what we have amassed, the break with the logics of production and efficiency, or with rules and norms of society, the ecstatic or violent dissolution of the self. Different rituals in different times have created frameworks for subverting the survival instinct and instrumental reason. This is the Dionysian in Nietzsche or the eroticism of Bataille; the total devotion to blind, chaotic forces. In such an experiential space, the goal is not dominance over another, but rather doing the unmentionable, the forbidden, perhaps being annihilated in the process. Here, pain and pleasure flow into each other, as in the theatre of suffering of the saints or the masochist. In one place, I see an abused St. Sebastian. There might not be any arrows lodged in his flesh, but his face reminds us of the torment and longing which we find in the spectacular torture scenes of baroque visual art. In another, I see a broken nose. I watch it with the same mix of nausea and excitement as I would have when passing a bloody traffic accident.

But there is still more. I think of the way people meet, even under conditions which one intuitively would not think could be conducive to reciprocity, care or recognition. The pictures seem to me to be to be applying another, gentler mode of subversion of rigid identities than the forms of

negation discussed thus far. Signs of vulnerability and intimacy appear in the scenes that one should think most strongly expressed a robust and aggressive masculinity. On some of the faces: signs of hesitation, of insecurity, even wonder. As if a disquieting question had appeared, at this exact moment in the ring. A “what now?” or an even more fundamental: “what am I doing here?” Doubt gives the personality depth. Doubt is also a result of our non-identity with our selves. We have a range of modes of being, of attitudes to ourselves and others. Contemporary psychology employs the concept of multiple states of self in order to capture this basic discontinuity. The holistic identity is also in this sense an illusion. The martial artist is not just a warrior in the ring. He is also a father, a brother, a lover and friend. He has potential for mercilessness and compassion, courage and cowardice, hardness and softness, femininity and masculinity. The different aspects do not just replace each other in time, but can paradoxically be active simultaneously. When one looks for such markers, the pictures receive another layer of meaning.

Aggressive narcissism, immediate presence, radical transgression, the plural and paradoxical self: being human involves all these domains of meaning. Our being and our endeavours cannot be abstracted into universal principles or reduced to singular perspectives. This means that there is always a possibility for something more, something else; something beyond what we at first glance suppose that we know or see. What can be better suited than photography to remind us of this?

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## **BRUTALLY SILENT – THE PORTRAITS BY KJETIL KAUSLAND**

ARNE SKAUG OLSEN

1: No Holds Barred: all tricks are allowed, or in other words: no rules. I see it as a challenge: photography is a heightened state of (the act of) seeing and is to memory what writing is to thinking. What writing and photography have in common is, in the end, about attaching to paper our experience of being in the world. Kjetil Kausland's photographs springs from a deep fascination for a sport, and for the physical experience of the presence in the moment of the body. But it is also about the experience of the sport as experience when the artist redefines the physical act through the gaze and the photograph. When writing, I must attempt to hold on to the experience that the photographs give me as a viewer. I write given the premise that photography, like language, has some specific qualities of representation; that is: standing in place of something else. It is possible to break these qualities down into its components in order to understand the photograph, but there is always some remnant left over that one cannot quite put a finger on, because it is never the same. One thing is that one can never quite predict the reactions and connotations of the viewer when confronted with the photograph; but another

thing is that the photograph, being an intractable medium, often reveals something about you – whether as a photographer or a viewer. And this blind spot, if we can call it that, is something artists often activate.

2. The photographs of Kjetil Kausland pull the fighters out of the arena and place them on a stage. They reconfigure space and visualise the fighter's unconditional humanity. They appear exposed and vulnerable to the gaze; both that of the photographer and that of the viewer. The sensitivity which dominates these pictures is in blatant contrast to the dramatic background circumstances. In these pictures, one finds no reference to the drama that has just been, or is about to be, played out. The referee, the audience, the TV cameras, the show and the circus are all missing. All that remains are the fighters, a suggestion of an arena, the cage, an occasional floodlight, the canvas. The sound of elbow hitting face and the ensuing roar of the audience are absent here.

3. Kausland activates the most basic quality of photography: its potential for construction. There is nothing accidental or naive or spontaneous about photographic representation. His photographs have both feet firmly planted in a documentary tradition which they at once subvert and redefine. This is never about documenting or displaying a social environment from the inside, but rather about telling stories. More about mediating an experience of presence in the world. *It's so quiet* is a phrase which often enters my head. Relating to these photographs is radically different from the experience of being a spectator at the event, and from the physical experience of performing the sport itself. It's an obvious statement, but

the experience of silence on being confronted with these pictures seems important and paradoxical. During the 20s and 30s, the German photographer August Sander tried to catalogue the entire German population. The final category in his *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* contains a series of portraits of dead people, all carrying the title *Matter*. These portraits are different in character from Sander's other portraits. I discern a different kind of distance to those portrayed, a more sensitive gaze. It is in the distance between this sensitive gaze and the abrupt designation of those portrayed that Sander's blind spot appears as something involuntarily poetic. It is a related poetic paradox I am trying to grasp by emphasising the materiality of Kausland's portraits; an attempt to put the experience made possible in Kausland's sensitive description of violence, or by the irrevocable in Sander, into words

4. Some pictures stick tenaciously to our consciousness as a result of the aesthetic experience they make possible. Since the advent of modernity, the human body has been the most important arena for representation. The photograph has existed in parallel with the industrial and digital revolution and has constantly both described and shaped how we look at ourselves. New technology in medicine, the arms industry, biotechnology all helps shape our bodies in ways that can be read as signs, as representation. Representation takes part in defining the human condition, if we continue to act on our cultural inclination for making up new ways of destroying and repairing the body. These photographs make possible an aesthetic experience of violence. It is the artist pulling the spectator out of the ordinary into a world where

representation is something other than that which we are used to. Kausland confronts me, the spectator, with an aestheticised experience which shifts the fighters in the cage closer to pornography as an aesthetic, physical expression. In the book *Untitled*, Jeff Burton shows us male actors from the porn industry in action. But as with Kausland, it is not the activity itself that is in focus, but the dissociation of the body from its surroundings. In the same way that there is no pornography in Burton's photographs, there is no violence in Kausland's portraits. Only a brutal silence. A no holds barred-fight is a ritualised representation without sexuality in the ordinary sense; a stylized meeting between two bodies recapitulating the experience of motion and collision. The outer characteristics are different: a swollen eye, a split lip, blood, but Kausland's photographs expose the fighters for a new gaze through the aesthetic. The gaze is disturbing or eroticising or fetishising, but never indifferent. Maybe this is where the blind spot which the artist activates is: in an aesthetic experience which makes an indifferent gaze impossible. It is no longer the gaze of the artist, but that of the viewer; the viewer's conquest and retelling of these photographs show that they are less a representation of reality than its transfiguration.

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