

THE WOMAN IN WHITE AND THE WHITE CUBE.
ON THE WORKS OF MARIA HAHNENKAMP.

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At first glance, Maria Hahnenkamp's works are highly aesthetic objects of a fascinating formal and technical perfection: photographs which hardly reveal what they portray and which are arranged in precisely cut passe-partouts and frames of bright white that turn these tableaux of perfection and purity into something sublime. Only when looking at them again, and yet again, these perfectionist images expose the subtle dramatics the artist concerns herself with. They are scenarios of the body and its representation, its appearance and disappearance within the dialectics of exhibition and disguise, seduction and refusal, aggression and shame, psychological affect and aesthetic effect.

In her complex images and installations, Maria Hahnenkamp explores the conditions of the system of representation itself by addressing the structure of the photographic image, and its space of representation in connection with the structure of our way of looking. One aspect has to be emphasized in this context: all of these scenarios – which are without exception characterized by a restrained theatricality – deal with an inherent moment of violence: a violence which all of us are basically subject to. It's "under the gaze", "the gaze of the other", says Lacan, that I am "photographed", I become a "tableau".¹

The crucial point here – and this is where Maria Hahnenkamp's work joins the explorations carried out by many other female artists – is that this imaginary state of being a *tableau*, of *being* an image, is assigned to "WOMAN". It is the "female" that is positioned on the side of the imaginary in order to embody, within this symptomatic complex, perfection, which in the context of our western system of representation ever since the days of classical antiquity has meant beauty – and, by way of the inevitable dialectical inversion, also the failure to achieve this perfect ideal.

Maria Hahnenkamp deliberately tries to locate evidence of this imaginary attribution to "WOMAN" in traditional, unspectacular and ordinary images, clichés and rituals taken from the context of women's everyday lives in order to find out more about the functioning of symbolic and social constructs and the power structures and their effects.

In Heinrich von Kleist's story "Über das Marionettentheater" ("On the Puppet Theatre", around 1800), the narrator tells us about a youth who "before his very eyes lost his innocence and (...) the paradise thereof". The state of paradisaical innocence refers to the boy's "natural grace", as expressed in the extraordinary gracefulness of his movements. The loss of innocence took place at the crucial moment when the youth, while watching his mirror image, suddenly realized that he resembled the famous classical statue of "The Boy with the Thorn". When he tried to imitate the graceful pose of the statue once more, however, he failed. He felt confused and embarrassed and his movements became clumsy and awkward: "... from this moment onwards, an incomprehensible change took place in the young boy. He began to stand in front of the mirror for days; and his charms left him one after another. An invisible and incomprehensible force seemed to encase the free play of his movements like an iron net."²

Kleist's story "Über das Marionettentheater" is a key story of early modernism. The loss of gracefulness which the poet associates with the loss of paradisaical innocence describes a modern experience: the reflection on one's own (mirror) image, represented in art by the paradigm of the mimetic portrayal and, since the Renaissance, considered the guarantor of his/her identity by the modern subject. This self-reflection, this sudden insecurity vis-à-vis his/her own image is not only tantamount to undermining the subject's supposedly certain identity, but also

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Book IX of the Seminar of Jacques Lacan (1998)*, W. W. Norton & Company, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1981); Jacqueline Rose, "The Imaginary", and "Sexuality in the Field of Vision", both in: Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London 1986; Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, New York 1995.

² Heinrich von Kleist, *Über das Marionettentheater, Aufsätze und Anekdoten*, Insel Verlag 1982.

the faith in his/her own perception. The armed gaze of the modern age gains a threatening dimension which is closely interlinked with the latest image technologies. Referring to photography, Walter Benjamin writes that, "Baudelaire describes eyes which one might want to describe as lacking the ability to look."³ It is significant to whom Baudelaire ascribes these cold, reflecting, expressionless eyes: it is the eyes of Satyr women, mermaids and prostitutes that cast their threatening spell over the poet.⁴

For modern art this means that the symptomatic figure of this radical change to which the system of visual representation is subject – i.e. the loss of the general validity of the mimetic image and the loss of beauty –, is "WOMAN", as a prostitute, a mechanical "bride", transformable "matter", a "media muse". We find this history of the radicalized gaze and the revolutionarily transformed image of modernism as well as of the media that produce and communicate this image inscribed as a subtext in Maria Hahnenkamp's "Scenarios". What Hahnenkamp makes us aware of in a differentiated way is the phantasmic image of the fetishized, voyeuristically available, excessively erotic, hysterical and destructive woman as well as its opposite, the woman mystified in her idealized purity.⁵ She does not do that in order to contrast it with the "true" image of "WOMAN", but to show how this ambivalent characterization of the "female" is connected to the process of perception itself and to the fictionality of the relationship between representation and subjectivity. Hahnenkamp's approach is characterized by reflexively juxtaposing the "function of WOMAN as a medium" with the conditions of the media process itself.

As has been mentioned before, one has to look very closely in order to recognize what is depicted in the photographs which Hahnenkamp produces for her strictly devised system of frame, embroidery, and spatial arrangement. In one type of her series, it is a body with female connotations, hidden under a veil or the folds of a robe; in another, we find differentiated sections of walls or rooms which, as it were, quote the exhibition space itself in a tautological fashion. In one of her series, Hahnenkamp – in accordance with her conceptual logic – incorporates the work of another artist: she photographed sections of a wall in a gallery which Sylvie Fleury had had painted in the colour patterns of various shades of lipstick and make-up.

The sections of these fragmented pictures are chosen in such a way that no "whole" can be recognized – no identifiable, comprehensible space or body. The eye of the beholder is forced to imagine and complete what is not shown, and through this very process is made aware of the basically constructed and imaginary character of any model of representation. The undefined space in the wall photographs – a space which cannot be virtually entered – corresponds to the principle of disguise or ambiguity used in the photographs of the fragmented figures, with the choice of the details shown in the pictures being a decisive factor. In their connotations, details of a white robe or of draped folds refer to the conventional topos of female virginity, but their shape suggests the female genitals. The observer's gaze gets caught in the folds of these surfaces and is pulled very close and yet kept at a distance. The almost white-in-white photographs give the impression of energy which is hidden under the veils, being reined in and suppressed. The tension which Hahnenkamp creates between the interior and exterior space is not limited to the visual level but simultaneously obtains a psychological dimension.

To create this effect, Hahnenkamp does not only photographically stage a subtle play of light and shadow, resulting in a spatial vagueness that is enhanced by fragmentation, but also, and above all, she reflexively refers to what is depicted – the body, the veil, the wall – to the system of representation itself, be it the law of the image or that of the exhibition space. She addresses the various levels of representation, the imaginary object of depiction, the support, the passe-partout, the frame, the wall and finally the gallery, interconnecting all of them by partly covering them with an embroidery pattern. The symbolic dimension of this embroidery – which may also spread to the walls of the exhibition gallery in the form of drillings – is many-layered: on the one hand, this decorative cover which is painstakingly engraved or drilled into the picture or wall surface by hand, contains a moment of aggression. By the metaphorical shift carried out by Hahnenkamp, this "violation" passes from the wall to the picture support (in painting, this would be the canvas), from the "canvas" to the robe and from there onto the skin. On the other hand, the varying scales (another method specific to photography) of these patterns, which

³ Walter Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire": in W.B., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols. I/II, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1980.

⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal*, Le Livre de Poche, Paris 1972.

⁵ cf. Jacqueline Rose, "Woman as Symptom"; in: J. Rose, op.cit., p. 215–223; Silvia Eiblmayr, "Automatismus und Medien: Die Frau als Symptom", in: Marie-Luise Angerer (ed.), *The Body of Gender. Körper, Geschlechter, Identitäten*, Vienna, 1995, p. 171–185.

Hahnenkamp copied from embroidery patterns, indicate an agency outside the pictures. Potentially, the pattern of the net which Hahnenkamp places over the images and the room could be enlarged as a projection to such an extent that the image itself is not communicated and is located in the interstices as it were. Nevertheless, it exists as a virtual effect, just like the "iron net" that encased Kleist's "Boy with the Thorn".

According to the logic of Maria Hahnenkamp's works, what is at stake, then, is not only the convention of the functional connection between the "female" and the imaginary, between "WOMAN" and her image, but also the convention of the "White Cube" which, in its imaginary purism, is a constitutive element of the ideal gallery space and the concept of art associated with it. It is the empty white space about which Brian O'Doherty critically states that in it "the presence of the strangest piece of furniture, one's own body, seems superfluous and obtrusive".⁶

Maria Hahnenkamp says about her art that she works "with internalized images of the body on a symbolic level" in order to "render the imaginary visible". As we have seen, the dialectics of body and image, exhibited object and observing subject, real and imaginary space applied by her, and the related question of the gender-specific disposition, are part of the history of modernism. The structural and functional relation between "WOMAN" and image, the female body and the system of visual representation, as articulated in the ambivalent interplay of surrender and rebellion, and appearance and disappearance which Hahnenkamp addresses in her works characterizes the self-presentations of female artists in this century.⁷ These stagings, almost without exception characterized by a moment of violence, can also be seen as both conscious and subconscious reactions to the instrumentalization of the female body.

Two examples of artworks, one dating from the 1940s, the other from the 1970s, may serve as references and thus point out the historic dimension of this issue which is still highly relevant today. The picture entitled "Relâche" ("No Performance Today", 1945) by Toyen, a woman artist of the surrealist movement: a situation of threat and punishment (symbolising Toyen's personal traumatic war-time situation) is represented by a female body, painted in a, as it were, "photo-realistically" perfect, fetishistic and erotic manner, thus exposing the woman to the voyeuristic gaze of the observers without allowing her to observe them in turn. Her body virtually disappears into the picture. Out of her conflict-ridden, spatially ambivalent position, she starts a (lethal) retreat to a space beneath the surface of the image, feet first. This surface is painted in a very open way: anticipating the technique of drip painting, it reminds us of flowing blood and can be regarded as a deliberate opposition to the "photorealistic" representation of the body. A comparably ambiguous, but less threatening staging can be found in the photographic work "Bewohnte Leinwand" ("Inhabited Canvas", 1976) by Helena Almeida. In her series of photographs, Almeida presents herself as a woman enclosed in the image's interior, gradually staging her own escape. Finally, she breaks through the picture plane, but disappears into it again to the point of complete invisibility.

Twenty years later, and faced with a media hyper-production which has left behind the 1970's pathos of the suppression and liberation of the body, Maria Hahnenkamp's methods are more reserved. What Douglas Crimp said about American photo-artists (Sherman, Goldstein etc.) in his essay "Pictures" as early as 1979 applies to her work as well, that the achievements of performance "become reinvested in the pictorial image".⁸

Hahnenkamp deliberately includes in her critical concept those topoi which determine the history of images, of the (apparative, photographic) way of looking and perception characteristic of modernism. She deals with the myths of trivial everyday culture and their effects on society, referring, from this position, also to a myth of modernism. She counters the modern ideal of "pure form", the purism of monochromy and the purism of the "White Cube" with its suppressed flip-side. In an early work, the sanded-down colour photographs of 1993, she reworked a series of photographs showing a woman during typical procedures of female beautification: at the hair-dresser's, in the beauty salon etc. During many hours of hard and precise work, the artist meticulously sanded down these pictures until all that was left of the shiny surface of the photograph was a narrow frame along the margins, or even nothing

⁶ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. Notes on the Gallery Space. Part 1*, Artforum, 1976.

⁷ cf. Silvia Eiblmayr, *Die Frau als Bild. Der weibliche Körper in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1993.

⁸ Douglas Crimp, "Pictures", *October*, no. 8/Spring 1979.

at all. The resulting monochrome white surface has thus an explicit history, and Hahnenkamp literally labours to suppress it. At the same time, the "image of perfection" which she produces in this way marks the symptomatic empty "female" space by covering it in a constitutive way, referring to both the element of denial and that of the internalized violence underlying this process.

(Translation: Susanne Steinacher, Maria Clay)