



MIRIAM
BÄCKSTRÖM

I Don't Know,
said Pierrot

Opening
14.06.2014 | 19:00

LAURE
PROUVOST

From Wantee to
Some Signs

15.06—
10.08.2014

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Extra
City

KUNSTHAL ANTWERPEN

EXTRA CITY KUNSTHAL

EIKELSTRAAT 25 - 31
2600 ANTWERPEN - BERCHEM

OPEN FROM
WEDNESDAY TO SUNDAY 13:00 - 18:00
CLOSED ON PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

EXTRACITY.ORG

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THANKS TO

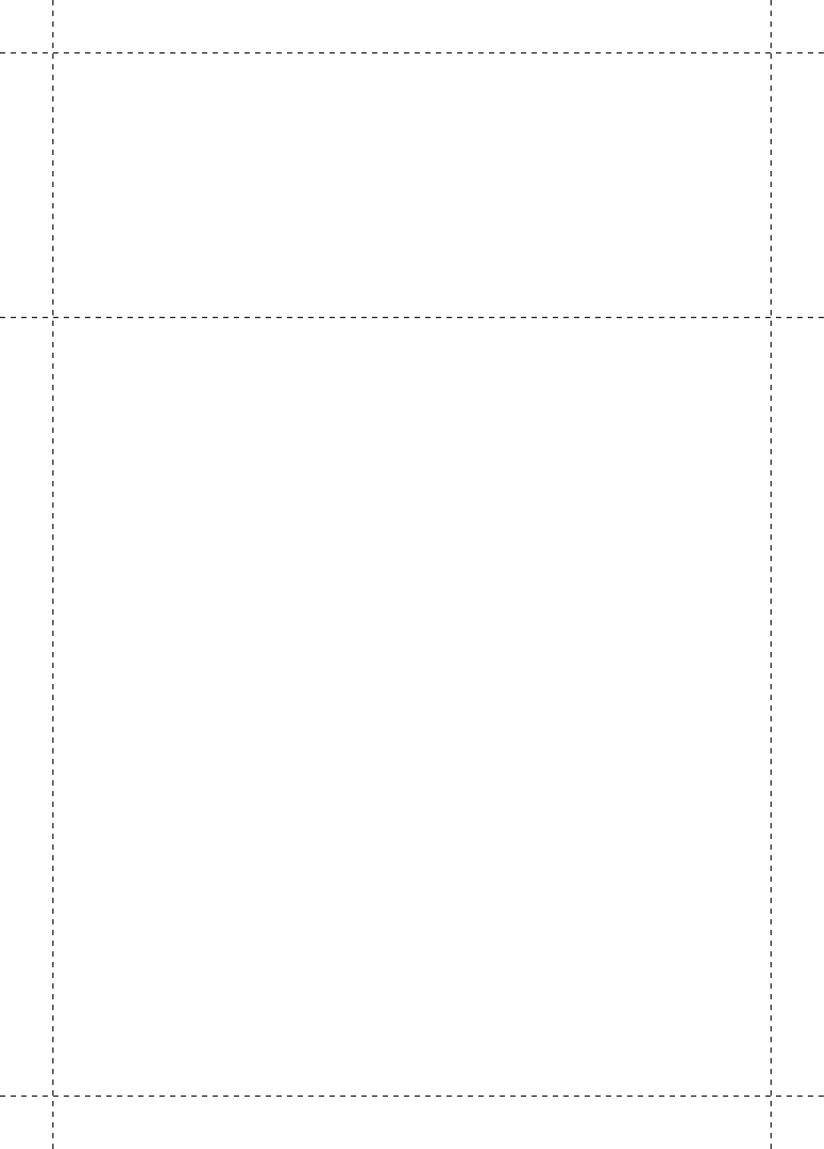
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MIRIAM BÄCKSTRÖM

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MIRIAM BÄCKSTRÖM

– I DON'T KNOW, SAID PIERROT

Extra City presents an overview of recent and new works by the Swedish artist Miriam Bäckström (1967, Stockholm), intersecting, in various configurations, the documentary and the fictional. Bäckström's inquisitive and subtle practice articulates ambiguous scenarios of personal transformation, role-playing and role-shifting, improvisation and an idiosyncratic notion of the 'character', to create new forms of reciprocity between unstable identities. Existing and ongoing projects explore story-making and story-telling as simultaneous, reciprocally influenced processes, where friction and slippage mark the transitions between word, gesture and self. The artist works with photography, video, text and an expanded understanding of 'scenography' to expose and rework conventions of depiction: her stages, protagonists and extras are vying for supremacy in the dialectic of representation.

Bäckström's interest in the theatrical – in the mobility of figures and backgrounds, in the spatial and experiential shifts they produce in their search for their elusive identity – reads as a meticulous consolidation of the domain of fiction, rather than a revelation of the 'truth' that fiction

metaphorized: "If I see fiction as something authentic, why leave the fiction at all?", as one of her 'characters', a celebrated Swedish actress invited by the artist to 'play the role of a human being', exclaims at one point. Bäckström's oeuvre unfolds like a piece of meta-theatre constructed around a loose group of dramatis personae, characters real or historical, abstract or allegorical: Pierrot or Now, a brown bear costume realized in mink fur or characters named by colours and sentiments, Reality or The Anonymous. They tread the no-man's-land between the selves performed in daily life and those invented in the process of making art, while the artist choreographs them in ways that combine directorial delicacy and a dose of cruel irony.

THE OPPOSITE OF ME IS I

The main hall of Extra City is occupied by a monumental tapestry, whose sweeping size refers the format of a cinema screen or a theatrical backdrop, more so than the representational codes of portraiture. Both the scale and title of the work – 'The Opposite of Me Is I' (2011)–, indicate that, as opposed to grasping and materializing the presence of the portrayed subject, the work creates a place for encounters between visitors and other 'images of portraits of characters' in the other works, the triple remove by which the artist defines the subject matter of her work. The tapestry has resulted from an intensive process of technical calibration, replicating the colour gradations of the original photograph within the parameters of the

weaving loom. The photograph features Börje Ahlstedt, an actor, dressed in a costume reconstructed from Antoine Watteau's painting 'Gilles' (1718–1720), in a reclining pose that recodes the melancholic resignation of Watteau's character.

Watteau's 'Gilles' is modelled on Pierrot, a stock character in commedia dell'arte, standing for boundless naiveté, predestined humiliation and the sadness of unrequited love. Watteau's take on the character makes Pierrot/Gilles, his vacant stare and the disconnection he introduces between that which is staged and that which is not, an emblematic presence in Bäckström's proposition, a tutelary figure of sorts for the entire project. Watteau's dreamy scenes have elicited a great deal of art-historical attention, a detective iconographic exercise that seeks to pinpoint the 'who', 'where' and 'how' of the painter's subjects: longing knights, tamed unicorns, lofty ladies and idealized landscapes.

In 'On Monstrously Ambiguous Paintings' (1993) – monstrous in the etymological sense of that which can be only indicated, pointed out, and not spoken – art historian James Elkins proposes an alternative route into the significance of Watteau's paintings, one that renounces the simple dichotomy between reality and fiction, looking at the ways in which meaning and its absence or refusal are enfolded. Watteau's art invents a realm of play in which disguise, costume and masquerade are geared to an intentional ambiguity: depictions of not know-

ing, a softening in the focus of meaning that diverts the iconographer's desire for clarity. Gilles, with his almost two-dimensional presence in front of the landscape, like a prop against a backdrop of props, is a study in both solitude and semantic uncertainty.

Watteau did not want to tell one story, but to interweave different stories: his 'fêtes galantes' portray Anti-Subjects, ebbing with an identifiable theme and then removing its crucial identifiers and multiplying its references until it could no longer be named. Elkins proposes we think of them as Not-Subjects – pictures initially conceived as having no subject, rather than pictures that effaced gradually their original purpose, either through avoidance, or accumulation and excess. Moving from specific plays to theater in general, Watteau paints the possibility of a vacant presence – he represents a presentation, a mode of encountering the viewer where the very substance of the encounter is endlessly malleable. Elkins ventures this proposition: "His position induced aporia then and now, and it is not too extravagant to say that he occasionally painted the idea of subject, rather than subject itself." It can be argued that, taking theatre as mental model for how subjectivities are constructed, upheld and negotiated between individuals, the characters they perform and the social settings that these performances support or reject, Miriam Bäckström delineates an equally fluid terrain for identity, camouflage or the impetus of self-affirmation. A state of un-focus and non-subject-ness, faint hints, traces of violence and strange complicities.

WHO AM I

The exhibition 'I Don't Know, Said Pierrot' also includes 'Who Am I?' (2011), a video of a live performance whose script was given to the performers just before the start of the event. Miriam Bäckström has stated: "My instructions to the actors at Kölischer Kunstverein, when I handed them the script one hour before the show, was that everything happening in the room should be used for that situation: microphone cables becoming entangled, sounds finding their way in from the street outside, a mobile phone suddenly ringing. For me this is a difference between theatre, where everything important is decided beforehand, and a situation, where those present decide what will happen and contingency rules. To not decide which reality is more important...". And, as she adds somewhere else, signalling once more a departure from a fixed 'reality', "Reality is a rather dull person, full of rules. Many rules, nothing but rules. Reality can't play; she believes the rules are the truth. Truth, by the way, is also a good character."

REBECCA

The scenario of Bäckström's film 'Rebecka' (2004) is based on interviews with and instructions to the actress Rebecka Hemse. Hemse was invited to be interviewed and photographed over the course of a six-month collaboration with the artist, whose brief was the deceptive proposal that she should play a 'human being'. An actor

playing a non-actor, immersing herself in a psychologically and socially undefined situation, and wresting an 'identity' from these reversed circumstances, assumptions and expectations. The brief leads to frequent improvisation and cringe-inducing situations, or to the realization that laughing on camera is more difficult than crying. Hemse eats, rather uncomfortably, in front of the camera, and Bäckström wonders if Hemse is ever unguarded. The answer ricochets off the question: "I'm most open when I'm playing open". There are disquieting moments, as when Bäckström inquires if Hemse could fall in love with her, or orders curtly that the actress puts up her hair – "Go and do it properly!". Hemse occasionally consults a set of typed pages and sometimes contradicts her own responses. As the interview progresses, and as the questions turn into commands, the two roles and identities become confusing, and their interaction equivocally malicious. Critical texts on the project have noted the gradual, masterfully orchestrated indistinction between the roles of mother and daughter, sadist and masochist, consumer and product. Far from an attempt to unsettle the border between the real and the fake, Bäckström seems intent on adding more complexity to the relation between the public and the private. Another set of actual or possible characters listed by the artist in an interview – the chosen one, the winner, the bastard, the artist, the employee, the parvenu, the unlikely one, the shirker, the daddy, the porn star, the one who has seen something we haven't seen, Mickey Mouse as himself, the King and his Kingdom –, works more in the sense of juxtaposition than

enumeration, pinpointing the ways in which these distinct quasi-selves bleed into one another, appear, at various junctures, as synonyms, antonyms or complements for each other.

KIRA CARPELAN

'Kira Carpelan' (2007) documents a yearlong collaboration with a younger artist, invited to take over Bäckström's exhibition at the contemporary art space Färgfabriken in Stockholm, and being offered in exchange access to all of Bäckström's resources – finances, equipment, diaries, contacts. Carpelan agrees that the exchanges are filmed, and the result is a maze of recursive interconnections. Bäckström explained: "She has been my artist, my work of art, and my material. I wanted to work with something, or somebody, that I didn't understand or recognize and to let this project and person control me, my work and my exhibition. I knew I'd have to adjust to the will of this person and to the decisions she made. I was interested in living under the pressure of not being able to plan, of not knowing what kind of difficulties Kira would put me in." The project touches upon confrontation, camouflage and adaptability: "What can you do for me? I can be an image of your limitations." Questions and answers such as these make it difficult to assess where, in the logic of the project, one artist 'ends' and the other 'begins', going through a spectrum of images of objectification, of selfhood as a temporary assemblage of pre-empted impositions and assumed personas. Blurring, also, the lines

between a very particular 'reality show', the tribulations of usurped identity, the difficulties of (first) defining and (then) conjoining 'art' and 'life'.

IRÈNE LINDH

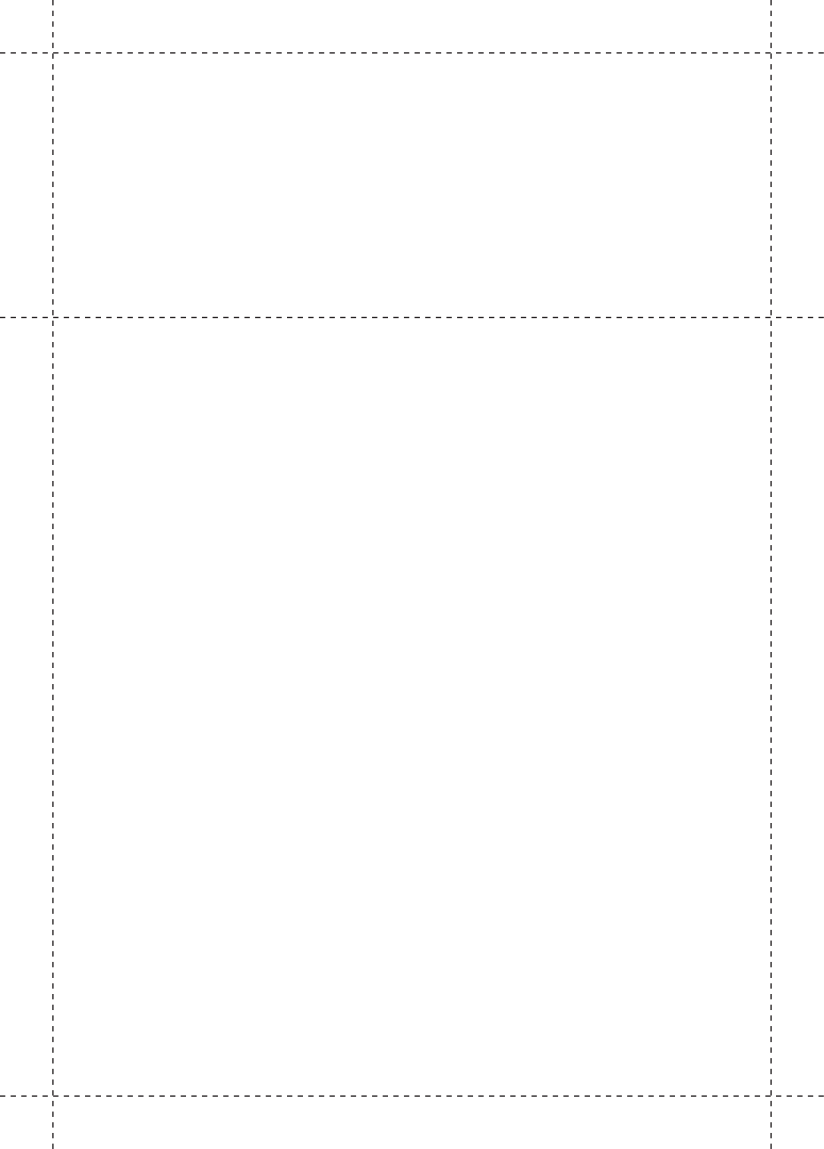
Costumes, masks and other objects in the show corrode the boundary between notions of character and décor. In addition to these, Bäckström's 'Mirrors', photographs of tinted glass installed in a way that suggests a rotational movement, and her composite portrait 'Irène Lindh' (2008) rephrase the vertigo of alterity as a non-linear sequence of revelation and apprehension. 'Irène Lindh' stages a simultaneity of multiple viewpoints on the same character, a kind of technological halo around the actress – once again instructed to become a "character who knows something we others don't know". Her secret strangely spatialized – and never divulged – in these synchronized perspectives, the character diffracts. Eight cameras capture the same physiognomy from different angles or distances and with different objectives, different lenses creating varying degrees of proximity. Irène Lindh appears as the unstable sum of all the personas that correspond to these registrations: the theatrical image, the official portrait, the film still, the furtive image, taken in secret...

SMILE AS IF WE HAVE ALREADY WON

In a lightbox on the façade of Extra City, as intriguing

'advertisement' for the exhibition, the visitor finds an abstract afterimage of a recent project by Bäckström, the sumptuous, large-scale tapestry 'Smile As If We Have Already Won' (2013), created for the Artes Mundi prize in Cardiff. The tapestry is an optical puzzle: textile surfaces translate photographic source images of interior spaces of figures made of mirror fragments, further fragmented by the surrounding mirrors in which they reflect. This landscape of mirrors, where figure and ground conceal themselves into (and as) the other, recalls Roger Caillois' potent formulation of a condition that has perhaps migrated from its initial definition as a pathology into a contemporary mode of inhabiting the social: the subject feeling himself or herself from the other side of his or her senses.

Exhibition realized with the support of Iaspis, Stockholm. All works courtesy of the artist and Nils Staerk Gallery, Copenhagen.



LAURE PROUVOST

– FROM WANTEE TO SOME SIGNS

Film-maker and installation artist Laure Prouvost (1978, Lille), winner of the 2013 Turner Prize, reimagines the configuration and function of Extra City's cinema, creating a 'dramaturgy' of objects and images, moving or still, that disrupts the conventions of film screenings. Since its launch on the 4th of April, the project 'Wantee and Grand Ma's Dreams' develop by incorporating voices, lights, props and sculptural interventions that complicate, enrich and disturb the experience of cinema. With these different means, the project foregrounds the artist's interest in polymorphous narrative: stories told from different viewpoints, full of incident and reverie, allowing errors and non-sequiturs, forgetting and improvisation. 'From Wantee to Some Signs', the new episode in the development of the project, functions as a cinematic, sonic and sculptural 're-edit' of the previous presentation.

In collaboration with AIR Antwerp and realized with the generous support of the Fernand Willame Foundation.