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JANNICKE LÅKER

APRIL 22–JUNE 2, 2014
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WAKE UP!

By Angelica Olsson

Wake up!

Albert Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942): “But one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. ‘Begins’ - this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery.”

Conservatism is on the rise in Europe, and once again the extreme right is marching through the streets. The gulf between social classes is growing, unemployment is rising, equality is being pushed back and social vulnerability is visible on the streets on a daily basis. As I write this, Sweden has just held parliamentary elections. There will be a power shift, as the Social Democrats will return to power after eight years, but meanwhile, a xenophobic party enjoyed great success and is now the third biggest party in Sweden. This is a frightening development, one that we have seen throughout Europe for the past decade.

How can we understand the fear, hatred and xenophobia? How can we understand poverty in the shadow of abundance and extreme consumption? How can we understand loneliness and the current psychosocial climate? Are interpersonal encounters at all possible in the late capitalist society?

Despite the fact that the Scandinavian countries are among the wealthiest in the world, a tenth of its population live in relative poverty, a figure that has doubled in ten years, according to the latest report from OECD. A development where the income gap is growing dramatically gives rise to hyper-segregated societies; here, Sweden stands out. As demonstrated by the intersectional perspective, segregation in society is based on several different and interacting grounds of discrimination, such as gender, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. These factors affect everybody’s everyday life, circumstances and socioeconomic status.

On a mental level, the ideals of liberalism have been incorporated as a basic value, as argued by,



JANNICKE LÅKER, still image from *9 ½ minutes*, 2000, image courtesy of the artist.

among others, theorist Anthony Arblaster, in *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (1984) . The responsibility for personal happiness, and for the personal life project, has been placed in the hands of the individual. You are solely responsible for your own failure.

Since the '90s, Jannicke Låker has consistently worked in the medium of film. Each of her video works are cutouts of the contemporary timeline and through her camera lens we meet people moving through the existential spaces of Northern Europe. The multi-layered and complex characters in her movies are exposed in vulnerable situations and display sides and emotions we would rather hide, such as prejudice, despondency and suppressed desire.

Her body of work constantly examines the state of society by staging situations from this reality. We are constantly staging our own lives, something we share with filmmakers like Jannicke Låker. But behind our successful exteriors and titles, and our

social media alter egos, is another, parallel aspect of reality, uncovered by Låker's art. Social criticism flows like an undercurrent through her images.

In his text *Having an Idea in Cinema* (1987), Deleuze writes about the close relationship between works of art and acts of resistance, drawing on the philosophical concepts of Malraux. Malraux says something very simple about art, namely that it is the only thing that resists death. Deleuze continues: "The act of resistance has two sides. It is human, and it is also the act of art. Only the act of resistance resists death, whether the act is in the form of a work of art or in the form of human struggle."

Recurring themes in Låker's works are loneliness, individualism, death, social vulnerability, destructiveness and shame. Her video works raise questions and invites the viewer to a deeper reflection on a broad range of hot topics, like feminism, racism, sexism, sociopolitical relations and contemporary psychological processes.



JANNICKE LÅKER, still image from *Running Woman*, 2007, image courtesy of the artist.

Your body is a battleground!

Who is she?
Why is she running?
From what is she running?

Who am I?
Why am I running?
From what am I running?

We are outside. It is night. In the darkness, we see a running woman. We hear the wind, distant traffic and her heavy breathing. She is staggering. She is bleeding from her nose and mouth. Something has happened, something brutal and violent. She is no longer young. She places herself in relation to time. She takes her place in it. There is a before and an after, of which nothing is told. The video is monotonous, repetitive. From what is she running? What is she leaving behind?

Running Woman from 2006 is my first encounter with the video works of Jannicke Låker.

Afterwards, as I close my eyes, I can easily see the woman before them, as if the image has been burned into my retina. A portrait of a woman, alone, in an isolated situation. My thoughts are spinning, activating my imagination, memories and experiences. The image becomes a projection screen. It makes me an accessory. Complicit. Låker is no longer dictating the story, it has been left in the hands of the viewer.

The woman in the film is struggling, forging ahead. She puts her fingers into her mouth, as if to check that all of her teeth are still there. Grabs her forehead. Radiates a complete despondency. She looks like she was dressed for a party, a sleeveless dress with flowers, a pin on her chest. Her hair is curled and she has make-up on her face. She is terrified. Her eyes open wide, like those of a fleeing, frightened animal in the headlights of a car.

Despite the fear, there is a clear determination, a strong sense of power and action. It is an image far removed from the stereotypical passive female

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role, so often presented and demonstrated as objective truth, throughout the history of the visual image in a patriarchal society.

A sign appears behind the running woman – Kinderplansche – revealing the site, a park in Berlin. Jannicke Låker says that her original idea was to shoot the scene between the ticket boxes of an abandoned fairground in Treptower Park. A deserted place, with decrepit ticket boxes and broken windows. A place you might find in a classic thriller.

At one point only does the running woman look into the camera, her gaze questioning, uncertain. The film is focused on her struggle as she runs, a mix of her acting and the authentic situation she is in, as a human being. The camera leaves her there, to disappear into the darkness. Låker provides no answer, but leaves me with questions, rather like the camera leaves the woman in the video by the side of the road, without explanation.

When Kieślowski wrote the script for *Blind Chance*, that premiered in 1987, he pondered what actually governs the life of a human being. Is it fate or chance? What is the cause for a certain chain of events? The film shows three possible scenarios as the main character is running to catch a train.

In the book *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* (1993), he lays out the ideas behind the film: “Every day we’re always faced with a choice which could end our entire life yet of which we’re completely unaware. We don’t ever know where our fate lies. We don’t know what chance holds in store for us.”

Tom Tykwer’s 1998 movie *Run Lola Run*, is inspired by the story of *Blind Chance*. We follow Lola, as she, much like the character in Låker’s film, is running through the streets of Berlin. Lola is chasing money to settle her criminal boyfriend’s debt to the mafia. “Every second, of every day, you make a choice that can change your life”, says the voice in the trailer. The movie addresses the so-called butterfly effect in chaos theory, that says that small, seemingly insignificant changes and variations can lead to huge, unpredictable effects elsewhere.

Just as in *Run Lola Run*, the act of running is at the heart of *Running Woman*. But in *Running Woman*, the forward momentum is a paradox, as it portrays an isolated, seemingly constant situation. The video lacks the forward momentum, so central to classical dramatic structure. The action is never developed, it is stuck in the same spot. This is Låker’s way of questioning the fundamental structure of narrative technique and the anglo-



JANNICKE LÅKER, still images from *Running Woman*, 2007, image courtesy of the artist.

saxon narrative model. The big, unpredictable event has already occurred. We meet here there, after the event, in the trauma.

Writer Sara Stridsberg says that the novel can harbor our worst fears, and be a place where terrible things are happening in a parallel reality, creating an opportunity for us to meet our deepest fears and the stranger within, and this goes for a work of art as well.

Act now!

Jannike Låker's works are characterized by an investigation of motion picture as a medium, and its conditions. Her video works utilize the aesthetics of both documentaries, home video and feature films. The lines between fiction and reality is blurred. Concepts are turned on their head. The illusion of a staging cracks when the process is made visible and the distance between being in front the camera and behind it disappears. Her early video work *No. 17* from 1997 and, and the later *Sketch for a Rape Scene* from 2003, where the concept of authenticity is questioned and deconstructed, are both good examples of this.

The camera and the gaze is demonstrated as a tool of power, closely connected to the position of the perpetrator. This approach became increasingly common among artists during the late '90s. It is a position where the artist, often using his or her own body, enters and explores uncomfortable roles outside the given agreements of society. The transgression simultaneously shows and renegotiates the normative boundaries of society. In Scandinavia, this approach is found in artists like Pål Hollender, Teemu Mäki and Joanna Rytel.

In *No. 17*, a young woman with a video camera meets an American tourist on the street. She invites him over to her place for a cup of tea. He accepts, and follows her home. The camera is rolling. She asks him to take off his shirt, and pose

for her new camera. When he refuses, she throws him out. Jannicke Låker acts in the video herself, and says that she was inspired by American talk shows when creating this work, shows where ordinary people are exposed in humiliating ways. This was before the days of reality shows like *Big Brother* in Scandinavia.

The video is part of a tradition where Scandinavian artists during the '90s mounted a fierce resistance to the patriarchal order, the male gaze and stereotypical images of women by offering counter-images in their works. However, as Magdalena Malm, currently Director of the National Public Art Council, writes, when this work was shown at the Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, interpretations did not focus on the feminist perspectives, but rather the complete naivety of their fellow countryman, the American. *No. 17* can no longer be shown, following what Jannicke Låker describes as a drawn-out, unfortunate process, but it can be found in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, Norway, who bought the work shortly after it was made.

In *Sketch for a Rape Scene*, Låker returns to the complex relationship between staging and authenticity. We find ourselves in an apartment, which is being renovated. We see a young woman walking around, talking to her mother on the phone. There is a knock on the door, and a young man enters. The woman recognizes him as one of the workers. The situation rapidly changes as he begins to act in a threatening manner. Suddenly, the director and a cameraman enters the frame and the illusion is abruptly broken.

A situation is being created in order to depict an act of violence. The action is no longer taking place between the potential rapist and the woman, however, but between the female director and the male actor. The director time and time again encourages the man to be more aggressive. She gives him forceful instructions, hard directions



JANNICKE LÅKER, still image from *Sketch for a Rape Scene*, 2003, image courtesy of the artist.

and consciously provokes him. His lines become mantras; at first directed toward the female actor, but soon increasingly toward the director. "So you like to expose yourself, don't you? But you don't want anything. You like to masturbate. Show me you little cunt!" The director replies: "You need to be more aggressive!"

The action resounds of language difficulties and communication breakdown. Dialogue and understanding seems impossible, precipitating yet another shift in the character of the video. The man suddenly becomes aggressive in a way that feels authentic to the viewer. The illusion ends. The work leaves a mixed aftertaste. What did we witness? A staged act of violence. But who is the perpetrator and who is the victim? Is the director or the actor the perpetrator? Or is it you and me, the viewer, who watches passively without intervening? Where does illusion end and reality begin? After all, is not fiction, staging, and the film itself part of reality?

You're a free woman!

In video works like *9 1/2 minutes* from 2000 and *Beautiful People #1* from 2005, characters are made to express sexism, racism and exotism in different ways. The films use black humor and deep irony. They make the viewer squirm, and are in many ways problematic in their provocations. The works make me wonder if it is enough to make problems visible and provoke in the context of art to create a space for critical reflection. There is an imminent risk that artists who strive to make different phenomena in society visible, simultaneously reproduce and maintain those very same structures that they try to question and break down.

In the 2013 video *Boogie With You*, Låker continues to investigate the relations between hierarchies, loneliness and suppressed desire. In the first image, an intimate cutout is established, with a handheld camera. We see a woman, about

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40 years old, through the eyes of a young man. She is drunk, we have just met, she has invited me over to her apartment. Suddenly, we are thrust out of the male gaze through the handheld camera to another cutout. The change makes us aware of the camera, an observer, mounted on a tripod. The gaze changes, becomes more cold and objective, a voyeur watching events unfold at a distance.

In the very first frames, a sense of nagging discomfort is established. The mood shifts with each sentence uttered between the two people. The older, inebriated, white woman and the younger, colored man. The woman acts out an entire register of different roles. She is domineering, while simultaneously talking about the suppression of women.

She is controlling and staging the situation. It is a sexual game, with hierarchical positions at stake.

He is smooth, complimenting her. She is making fun of older men and their desire for younger, exotic women, unaware of her own position in the game, and the racist undertones she displays. When he makes her aware of her own desire, she is provoked and recoils in shame and self-loathing.

“We’re equal! You’re black and I’m a woman!” she exclaims. She denies having called him black, but in the same breath she claims that he is from a different culture. Another parameter is brought to light: the hierarchical position in relation to economic conditions. By assuming that he is in a position where everything is about survival, she once again places herself in a superior position. She makes snide comments, revealing her prejudice. The woman’s gaze reduces the young man to a racialized object, the other, a projection screen, colored by structural discrimination and racism.



JANNICKE LÅKER, still image from *Boogie With You*, 2013, image courtesy of the artist.

“We must share this with each other!” says the woman in the video. An ambiguous statement, at once dictating and asking. Is it possible to share an experience of alienation or subordination? The work may be interpreted as criticizing feminism as a movement from within, as well as the white woman’s lack of insight regarding her own privileged situation. But those words also carry a criticism of the idea of essentialist identities and the subject as a whole.

In *Hegemony, Power and the Political Dimension of Culture* (1999) theorist Chantal Mouffe argues that a correct understanding of the complexity of subordination is only possible when we understand the plurality of relations of subordination that a single individual can carry, and the fact that an individual can be dominant in one relation and subordinate in another. The plurality of identities that Mouffe speak of underlies the characters in Låker’s video.

Boogie With You is pervaded by a sense of vulnerability. A vulnerability which is neither found in the racialized or genderized body, but rather points to the loneliness, lack of communication and difficulty to meet in interpersonal relations, both on a personal and a structural level. Is it possible to meet another person outside society’s normative structures?

There is nothing educational about Jannicke Låker’s films, neither do they want to declare some kind of objective truth or suggest simple solutions. They don’t come with any moral judgements, and they are not preaching. Instead, we encounter an artist who treats painful subjects and dark contemporary themes with honesty, directness and great courage. Her video works make us think and reflect on their characters, on our own actions, and our own position.

Let us return once again to Camus and *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “To think that the work of art can be considered at last as a refuge for the absurd,

it is itself an absurd phenomenon and we are concerned merely with its description. It does not offer an escape for the intellectual ailment. Rather, it is one of the symptoms of ailment which reflects it throughout a man’s whole thought. But for the first time it makes the mind get outside of itself and places it in opposition to others, not for it to get lost but to show it clearly the blind path that all have entered upon.”

[Angelica Olsson](#) was born 1978 in Stockholm, but lives and works in Gothenburg. Since her Master Degree in Fine Art from Valand Academy in 2009, she has been active as an artist, teacher, art educator and coordinator. A. Olsson has also studied Archeology, Social Anthropology and Art history. In 2014 she was admitted to the Master program of Fine Arts in Film – with specialisation in Processes of Filmmaking.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jannicke Låker was born in Drammen, Norway, but lives and works in Berlin. Her work is mainly focused on film and performance.

J. Låker studied at Trondheim Academy of Fine Art and the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. Her works have been displayed at, among other, the Whitney Museum in New York, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, MOMA in New York and The Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo.

more info:

www.svilova.org

info@svilova.org



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