

KUNSTforum

Q&A with Charlotte Thiis-Evensen

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On 6 April, Charlotte Thiis-Evensen opens her solo exhibition at Lillehammer Kunstmuseum, followed by another solo exhibition at OSL Contemporary in Oslo. At the same time, she is part of the group exhibition *Døden og kjærligheten* [tr. Death and Love] at Bergen Kunstmuseum. Recently, Kunstforum asked her some questions about her art and what inspires her.



Charlotte Thiis-Evensen, still from the video 'Uten tittel', 2013.

What are you working on currently?

'At the moment, I'm working on a video series where I recontextualize scenes from paintings by Edgar Degas (1834–1917). For several decades towards the end of the 19th century, Degas was working on a series of motifs where women were brushing their hair in different ways. I've used one of the motifs where a young woman, because of her posture while brushing her hair, looks more like a child than a woman. I saw this painting at Musée d'Orsay in Paris a year ago, but since then, I've discovered that the motif is originally from Degas' painting *Scene of War in the Middle Ages* (1865), where a naked woman, probably raped, lies sprawled on her stomach with the hair forward on the battlefield.

'I have filmed five young women all brushing their hair in the same posture as in the painting. Altogether, this will be a five channel piece.'



Charlotte Thiis-Evensen, still from 'Gre hår', 2013.

Can you describe your process, from idea to realisation?

'I work very intuitively. An idea will suddenly pop into my head and when it does, I'll start working immediately. I'm often inspired by other forms of art, either music, film, or visual art. The last time I was in Paris, I found myself inspired by a series of photographs at the European Museum of Photography in Marais. During the 80s, Alice Springs photographed several famous women and their children. The portraits depict glamorous, disillusioned women resting their children on their hips as props, or lying crying on the floor towards the edge of the image.

'Now, with this series at the back of my mind, I'm developing a video series of my own, where each video will be a portrait of female Norwegian artist with a child. As I develop the idea, I'm working with sketches, reading literature that can expand the project, and talking to my photographer about possible locations and technical aspects suitable to the idea, in terms of what camera to use, lighting and composition. These new scenes will be filmed this summer.

'For the last three years, I've been working with the same photographer, Marte Vold, and also the same editors in post-production. Before, I used to film everything myself, but lately I've been working with more advanced cameras, such as RED- and High Speed-cameras, and developed the technical aspects in several ways. I also have a technical consultant, Bjørn Frode Holmgren, who helps me with both editing and mounting the pieces, in order to get the technical aspect working as well as possible.'



On location.

What are your main influences when creating a work of art?

‘I studied literature at the University of Oslo, and feminist literature theory was one of my majors. I read everything by Virginia Woolf, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Simone de Beauvoir with great interest, and I think this works as a foundation for me to build on. After finishing university, I still find myself inspired to a much greater extent by the art in itself, rather than the theoretical material, whether it’s fiction, music, or visual art.’

Can you name an artist, piece of art, or exhibition that has inspired you?

‘It is difficult to name only one artist and one art work. A couple of years ago, I spent six weeks in London, in an effort to learn better English. My advisor was an English video artist. We saw several exhibitions a week, and the other days we spent talking about art in her studio. During that period alone, I saw over 40 exhibitions! When it comes to seeing what other artists are doing, I’m insatiable and always curious, and my inspiration shifts according to what I see.’

‘This summer, I saw William Kentridge’s outstanding and expressive video installation at dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel several times, it really had an impact. Recently, I saw Rosa Barba’s exhibition in Bergen, dealing with time in different ways and that also had an impact. Eline Mugaas and Elise Storsveens curatorial approach at Kunsthall Oslo, where they exhibit forgotten female artists from the Norwegian art history, makes me very optimistic.’



Charlotte Thiis-Evensen, still from 'Gre hår', 2013.

'The day I discovered Degas' painting *Combing the Hair* at the National Gallery in London was also a highlight, which in turn sparked this big video project I'm still working on.

'When I finally got to see an exhibition by Joseph Beuys at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, something just fell into place. And the first time I saw Tori Wrånes do a performance at UKS in Oslo wearing a wedding dress and anus mask, it led to three collaborations between us.

'Lastly, I have to mention the first time I discovered Sophie Calle – it was in a project where she read short stories from everyday life in French-English. That provided a role model I never tire of looking back on, again and again. This spring, I'm really lucky to be exhibiting at Lillehammer Kunstmuseum at the same time as her.'



Charlotte Thiis-Evensen, still from "Uten tittel", 2013.

Can you name a writer or book, fiction or theory, that has inspired your work?

‘For a period, I read everything I could find by the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard. I found his precise and distinctive language and cynical view of life interesting, but at the same time it made me puzzled and pensive. He is in no way an author who writes particularly for the benefit of women. Still, during that period I made a feminist piece entitled *Falling Trees*, a title taken from his production.

‘I’ve also been quite drawn to Danish feminist film, and I was inspired by Jytte Rex’ film *Tornerose var et vakkert barn* [tr. *Sleeping Beauty was a Beautiful Child*], where Rex toys with the possibilities of the female gender at a time when that was taboo in a different way than it is today. I like to re-contextualize scenes and ideas from different periods and other artists’ work –taking something out of its own time, and placing it into ours by giving it different nuances, sounds, and colours.’



Charlotte Thiis-Evensen, still from ‘Trær som faller’, 2011

Why is art important?

‘I work within TV as a video journalist for NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting), and as a documentary filmmaker, and as an independent artist. I think that the art scene is important because it’s the one context where you’re completely free to express yourself, without having to worry about viewership and other commercial considerations getting in the way of what you want to express.

‘That is, of course, a truth with great modifications, given that the art scene also has its share of greedy commercial vultures. Still, I think that if you make the right choice and don’t compromise too much, you have a unique possibility to make something that can really mean something, something that can stand in stark contrast to other means of expression in today’s society. That is what makes art important and meaningful, for both the artist and the viewer.’