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Hanne Loreck

"Now they will be immortalized." Making the Autobiographies of Others

"Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one recounts it." Walter Benjamin [1]

Gitte Villesen's filmic narrations form an archive of portraits. In her videos she is frequently, although not exclusively, interested in female figures from older generations, in women who have apparently never intended to make their appearance in the media. But now that they have entered into a dialogue with the camera, with the artist, with their objects, collections, and memories, the achievements for which they have earned recognition and esteem in specific circles can be rediscovered. While their autobiographies emerge before their very eyes they appear young and fresh. In 1987 Marguerite Duras, then 73, found an explanation for such youthfulness: because women have until just recently been described only externally, their words are not yet worn out, and they "remain rooted in the materiality of life." [2] This not only applies to their speech, but also to their image.

At the age of 79 Kathrine still makes lace every day (*Kathrine Makes Them and Bent Collects Them*, 1998). A master craftswoman, she has received commissions from the Danish queen. Ingeborg is considered the first among her peers (*Ingeborg, the Busker Queen*, 1999), and her Busker Museum, run according to personal inclinations, was a public success until its closure by the authorities. For almost three decades she has looked after the rats with which she and her husband performed circus tricks. We should not place the more recent etymological aspect of the word busker in the foreground here – making money through performances – but see Ingeborg's activities in a different light: through popular entertainment she has looked after the mental well-being of those whose cultural and social life takes place on the street rather than in the closed bourgeois institutions of family and theater, for example. Éva Molnár, a librarian and curator, is the key figure in a Budapest artists' club for which she has worked for over half a century (*A Silent Movie*, 2008). Ms Debus-Steinberg keeps a meticulous archive of data on Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's famous Frankfurt kitchen of 1926. On her own initiative she searched for originals for years and examined around 600, half which she took apart.[3] Today she has a store of fittings from 20 of them (*Kitchen etc.*, 2006). Even though Debus-Steinberg's records follow individual criteria and cannot be considered professional in an authoritative sense, no museum possesses such an extensive collection of information and objects related to this revolutionary invention. Villesen's most recent work is a three-part film installation, again portraying women. Yenden Joff (*"An Important Story,"* 2009) and Mariama Corr (*"Since You Ask, I Will Give It to You,"* 2009) are great-grandmother and grandmother, both Gambian singers once also well-known in Senegal, both experienced in magical practices and the healing arts. Their daughter and grand-daughter Mariam Senghor (*"He Has to Have Knowledge,"* 2010) shares this knowledge with them.

Gitte Villesen has on the one hand made the lives of her subjects visible (or audible) through activities, objects, and collections, some useful, many the result of personal predilections, even obsessions. On the other hand these collections are themselves somewhat invisible, non-public, so they are as mute as they are articulate. This applies to the majority of female biographies.

Organized by the artist's own fascination, the proximity of archive and fiction is conveyed precisely through the accidents of these biographies: the unsystematic and associative discovery and collection of individual lives, and the invention, the narrative potential, that never results in the same life twice. This becomes particularly clear with Solveig (*Solveig*, 2002), a transvestite and for some years now transsexual: Solveig recreates herself twice and associates the second version with the use of women's clothes and a woman's name, not with the operative remodelling of the body into a female anatomy.

In 1936, finding the storyteller a dying breed and thus tracing its tradition, Walter Benjamin brought two "archaic ... types"[4] into play: the resident tiller of the soil and the trading seaman, who, without overlap, had remained stereotypical since the artisanal trading of the Middle Ages. For in the once migratory, now settled craftsman news from afar, the spatial dimension, and history, the temporal element, come together. But although the tradesman and the lace maker share certain traits, such a basis for narration knows no female narrator, and the mobility of the author – as well as his authority – is historically male. From today's more gender-critical perspective, however, female narrators can certainly compete with their male counterparts. Benjamin finally reflected – quite in the sense of his materialist approach – on the "practical matters"[5] governing the narrator: "This all points to one of the essential features of every real story: it contains, openly or covertly, something useful." And he continues, without any perception of the gender simplification of his argument: "In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today 'having counsel' is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because of the communicability of experience is decreasing."[6]

With this juxtaposition we find ourselves at the center of Gitte Villesen's works and artistic approach. Her films and videos revolve around lived experience, which comes about through being narrated, even performed, in response to interested, well-meaning questions. It is not exchanged – camera image for story – but produced through interchange. When the ship's captain, Benjamin's archetypical seaman, meets the lace maker, as in *Kathrine Makes Them and Bent Collects Them* (1998), it is an encounter of concentrated time and extended space. Kathrine – it has already been mentioned that at the time of filming she was 79 – is not only a specialist for elaborate handicraft techniques; when Bent collects her precious objects she also experiences the way in which her things have a material as well as an ideal value. The lace preserves time twice: the time of its fabrication and the tradition.

Through her media setting Gitte Villesen creates a space in which the curious collections of her protagonists come alive, because they are set in motion for others. Shown initially to the filmmaker and also often to a third person, they are given an audience and thus an unexpected significance. All collections follow radical personal preferences, even laws. This *Gestus* of the private causes them to seem female, quite apart from the biological gender of the majority of the interviewees. These manufacturers and collectors have all shown a fascination and passion for everyday things and activities. Conversely they have encountered the different or fantastical as something ordinary. Experiences and ways of dealing with things become apparent here, which playfully turn around all idea of social normality, of precepts and prohibitions, perhaps even inverting them entirely. Both the material practices themselves and their presentation occur unprogrammatically and with remarkable naturalness. We have the impression, for example, that in the fairground attraction of a stuffed calf with two heads Ingeborg feels the tragicomedy of its death: it did not know which mouth to suckle with.

To describe these activities as hobbies, or even, looking at them more seriously, to describe the women as devotees would be ridiculous given that these activities are their raison d'être and life's work. There is an unsentimental feeling of taking care of things about these women, but also a sense of humour, even self-mockery. They have not brought together what fulfills them for a media presence, as Gitte Villesen's simple filmic procedure makes clear. But now that they trust the artist by going on camera, they want to be sure of being properly apprehended. They welcome her into their worlds, offering participation; the cup of coffee served is an important indication of this. The artist's attitude is as unobtrusive as her camerawork. She listens, rarely asks questions. The question why is almost never posed, as it would disturb the activities' subtle logic, which glides back and forth between obsession and daily routine, eccentricity and habit. Kathrine the lace maker, for example, sits enthroned in her armchair with her special work-board in front of her; she knows every movement of the hand – the result of a long-practiced language of material and gesture – but she asks "What can I say?"

Gitte Villesen leaves the questions open, embedded in the way in which her subjects share things through their presentation of themselves. The question of the specific situation of the woman artist is also left unasked – and Kathrine and Ingeborg are artists, even though in gender-political terms neither handicraft nor street art have ever been able to claim the male-heroic status of true art for themselves, and neither have the two women been interested in this privilege.

Gender difference is implicitly present, however, when Bent covets the lace that Kathrine makes. Why does he collect it? Because it is "really quite fine handwork." This is a reply based on the classical collecting standard: quality. It was Bent, after all, who asked Gitte Villesen to document his collection – and thus to convey it in a different way: immaterially, as it were, without touching. Conscious of its value, the collector associates the lace with an old, dying, national tradition of women's handicraft. Its techniques have altered, but Kathrine still works with the old methods. It is the creative productivity of women that is concentrated – every evening, as we hear from Kathrine – in craftwork, and combines the precious materialization of cultural knowledge with the – also traditionally female – care of the home.

There is the nice term of "devotee" to describe someone who carries out an extra-professional activity with great intensity. The devotee does not pursue a hobby; it is pure desire, a devotion that has certain affective qualities of a love relationship and may even take the place of a loved one. Kathrine invested five years' work in a tablecloth using the technique descriptively called the Great Heart. Would it not otherwise be almost impossible – and also particularly desirable – to wrest such materializations away from their creators, to separate what was never intended for sale from the intimate, domestic, family relationship?

However well Bent can substantiate his collector's passion ethnologically, what the viewer is able to perceive is very different. Once the lace articles have returned to Kathrine's house to be filmed at their place of origin, Bent begins to unfold their wrappings of pink tissue paper in order to hold them up to the camera with their maker. Complementary to the improvised unfolding and demonstration of the fabric, the camera at first pans across the white fabrics before focusing on their various patterns. A certain tenderness in dealing with these precious objects can be felt on all sides. The sensuous deference of the participants creates a link between them which transcends the folkloristically interesting character of the collection, and allows us to sense that such an attitude embodies a different value from that inherent to the historical-material and aesthetic appraisal that Bent's lace gives rise to at trade fairs or special exhibitions.

The artist does not so much document this "alternative" value as bring it about, without ever explicitly addressing the point at which the passions and fetishisms of the protagonists deviate from "normality" – a normality implied by the hierarchically organized cultures of gender.

Besides her subjects' sex, Gitte Villesen's settings take in other elements of gender marking and assignation, among which the choice of location plays a prominent role. They are usually interiors, which seem to guarantee the intimacy within which women can speak and show (themselves). What for the Gambian singers was the condition of their appearance on camera – being filmed in "their" room – is also provided by Katherine's eerily tidy living room workshop. For here something is literally unfolded that – undercover, as it were – has long surrounded napkins and tablecloths: a certain fetishisation of lace.

Small labels are attached to Kathrine's lace artworks, like titles. *Kirstine, Grethe* or *Lizette* describe the patterns according to their inventors among the "old lace girls." The anonymity of production in a late-18th-century industry of thousands of young women has now been reversed. The synonymity of first name and design personifies the pattern and makes palpable the intimate closeness between the work and its maker, and by extension today's small circle of experts. Although classical genealogies are never based on first names, but patriarchally through surnames, a history now emerges in the names of certain women, a history that cannot be reconstructed through patents and official registrations, but that comes to light in the practice of various techniques and patterns – and is now, as Kathrine jokes, being "immortalized" together with her and her collector.

The filmmaker sensibly does not attempt to press for a deeper rationale for the exchange of these complex artifacts for the capital of the urbane captain. And so Gitte Villesen – and I see this as a great achievement – keeps the horizon of imaginary normality outside. She quite naturally shows an equality of enthusiasm, whether for handicraft or for collecting, and does not refer back to the truth of gender norms. For these would consolidate themselves in the model of investigative questioning. Gitte Villesen proceeds differently: she declares the filming process to be a part of the documentation; she negotiates it, in fact, with the protagonists, thus creating a dialogical framework within which this relationship speaks.

Gitte Villesen and Lars Erik Frank begin one film of the double projection of Solveig's portrait (*Solveig*, 2002) with the narration of the protagonist's choosing of her name. In close-up we see the head-and-shoulders view of a person in women's clothes, shoulder-

length hair, a prominent pearl necklace, makeup. Preempting any doubt as to her sexual identity – we hear in the next sequence that Solveig used to be called Niels and for a long time now has led a transvestite everyday life – she talks of her joining of the Danish Transvestite Union in 1996. The organization's first requirement was the adoption of a female name. Solveig's aversion in this key scene to the conventional symbolic act of nominal identification with the female gender is both audible and touching: she rejects the names already assigned to previously close, perhaps loved females – those of former wives, of her daughters. Yet they still remain, in negation, the poles of a possible female identification. The "girl in him" (disguised, in his own words, by the former super-macho), whom he has gradually given more air to breathe and space to live in, now receives the name of his greatest, unrequited love. Only through the one-time love for the woman still vividly kept in mind can the transvestite love him/herself in her/his dual biography. But this love, which takes on a caressing tone when the name is pronounced in Norwegian instead of Danish, has a melancholy touch because it remains unfulfilled.

In order to leave the house and go about in public, the girl in Solveig needs to be given a face: "I have to put on my face and all that," as she says. "So I know how hard it is to be a girl. I know all about it." Not only in itself, but in the eyes of others, being a woman is hard work that needs to be mastered. It is work on the image. Gitte Villesen and Lars Erik Frank convey this in the other half of the double projection by showing Solveig, the transvestite and transsexual, as she has been reported in the media. In this sequence Solveig holds the press photos in front of her face like a mask, like makeup. While the camera gaze focuses on the photographs and headlines about the sexual transformation of Niels into Solveig, Solveig's gaze cannot be seen. Whether intentionally or not, this staging exemplarily demonstrates the feminist theory of femaleness as guaranteed by its image, as the position that must give every reason to be looked at and not to look.

This is why all the images of Solveig are almost identical. They show her in her flat, where not only her clothes, jewelry, and makeup speak of her femaleness, but also the traditionally feminine interior. It is repetition, as both image and sound make clear, through which the gender position becomes ingrained. As technically theoretical as it sounds, this "doing gender" is affectively loaded. Solveig is often visibly moved by herself and her story in words and images. Her sociopolitical success as an activist and public figure is contrasted with her pain at the loss of contact with her mother, daughters, and grandchildren. For her family deny her admittance to the female line of the family genealogy.

But what seems annoyingly narcissistic (and psychologically speaking has something of the machismo that Solveig often calls her dominant former mode of behaviour) does not become merely reflective. It is, however, turned into political activity in the struggle for the social recognition of transvestites. This includes the official right to bear a female name because of a corresponding entry in one's passport. Solveig insists on the juridical dimension of the first name – a passport makes it possible to cross national borders, but it also allows one to "pass" as a woman and to live an ordinary life in which legal action can be taken against sexist abuse. The decisive thing here is that there is no need for gender to be surgically guaranteed. The passport bridges the gap that results from not being allowed to ask the reason for transvestism. That the name itself and its intimate history highlights this gap brings a deconstructivist under-standing of the subject closer to a socio-political one – without bringing them completely into line, however.

From many hours of footage Gitte Villesen and Lars Erik Frank have edited those sequences in which Solveig – without ever smiling – talks briskly and soberly without interpreting herself or her motivations. The filmmakers' voices can occasionally be heard (and read in the subtitles), often because they answer what Solveig says with a brief but thoughtful yes. This method, apparently indebted to a veracity of tone, seems marginal, yet it has an important function. The presence of a woman and a man who, unlike Solveig, are unseen, places the imaginariness of femininity and masculinity like a filter before a figure whose biography, beyond all therapeutic self-explanation, is a pointer to a changed, open society.

In the more recent works the focus has altered, and the present-absent, whose possible forms I have recounted up to now, is given a new turn. Gitte Villesen – as usual attentive to and interested in subtle peculiarities – follows the trail of the Gambian singer Chilli Willi, who regularly appears in a cultural café in Norway and has set a magical object into its threshold in order to make it attractive and promising. Interested in this intervention, Gitte Villesen goes to Gambia, where an entire family clan of marabouts, religious

leaders, and medicine people initiate her on camera into their rituals and ceremonies. And they make sure they really are being filmed, or address the camera with the catchphrases that usually introduce a live show: "Good afternoon, dear ladies and gentlemen ... "

Juju (White Magic), 2008, revolves around the extraordinariness that cloaks itself in the mask of visibility. A juju is a handmade object intended to have a supernatural effect, primarily to protect its holder against animals and other people, to avert black magic and to make wishes come true. Jujus are non-mimetic and should be carried about the body or placed in a room; they circulate within a religious tradition; they have to do with belief. Jujus can be shown. How they are made and where you can buy them can even be filmed. But their effect can only be narrated.

Jujus are also, in their way, embedded in the relations between the sexes; knowledge about them and their rituals and practices lie in the male line. Their impact also occurs in traditional gender opposition. A father makes a juju for his daughter Mariama Corr in order to reinforce her success as a singer, even make her famous, but above all to protect her from evil. This, however, will only work as long as she does not get involved with men. Her husband, on the other hand, used his juju to prevent her from wanting to continue singing when she became his wife (*I Will Arrange Everything. It Will Be the Best Film Ever*, 2009/2010): empowerment and oppression are attached to the same practices of the imaginary as wish fulfillment, intimidation, or even fear. The effect of these jujus, whether positive or negative, is in any case anticipated in dependence on male magical power.

But the father also transcends the segregation of the sexes by teaching his daughter his healing skills – on her own responsibility, however: "Since you ask, I will give it to you." Shifts like these along the gender boundaries repeat themselves in the next generation, in which the mother's eldest child, a daughter, Mariama, is for her part also initiated into the practices of juju magic. This changes nothing in being excluded on principle from religious office as a girl and woman and having to relinquish it to the younger brother (*Juju [White Magic]*, 2008). Mariama states the reason: "Because I am a girl, I am a woman." And Gitte Villesen does not probe, does not suggest emancipation from the gender hierarchy. She makes the personal comment that Mariama would make a good marabout. Not only would Mariama probably have no answer to the question of the acceptance of such a tradition; repeating the reason for it three times as a quote from others, an adage of the father, the brother, is much more striking. It enables us to feel the power of the rhetoric of gender roles. When the lively young woman more or less whispers the objection, "because you are a girl, you are a woman," tentatively retelling it in the first person, it sounds as if she hasn't quite internalized this postulate. For she too is able to perform the ceremony that precedes a medicinal treatment. But she is merely said to have this knowledge; although she practices it as if in secret in private rooms, in her function as wife she is not allowed to demonstrate it.

Gitte Villesen listens in astonishment to the men, the future magicians and healers, who seem to be telling her tall stories. Light and enlightenment are invoked, but they have also been materialized in a certain practice: the students are filmed chewing light bulbs, and the camera is called upon to record the proof of the magical in the ritual, the uninjured oral cavity. Telling tall stories, the metaphor par excellence for fabulation and invention, is already linked to electrification, and enlightenment is both magical and modern technology. With the cultural difference the quality of the narration has changed. For as a Western listener I cannot separate what is fantasized from real experience. At any rate the virtual reality of "as if" comes into operation. And the juju amulets make worlds plausible in which everything seems possible, even a change of sex or, as is said, that men can bear children and become women. But at the same time there are laws that align the other world to tradition.

Translation: Michael Turnbull

(1) Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller. Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (1936), in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings: 1935–1938*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Marcus Bullock, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, vol. 3, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2002, p. 143–166, p. 148.
(2) Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities* (1987), quoted in Eva Meyer, "Autopoesie," in *Autobiographie der Schrift*, Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, Basel 1989, p. 7–40, 18.
(3) Debus-Steinberg began this process with her former partner Franz J. Much.
(4) Benjamin, "The Storyteller," p. 145.