

ELINA BROTHERUS

IN REFERENCE TO A SUNNY PLACE

ARTISTS AT WORK (2009)

Who is watching whom? Who is the artist, who is the model? Who gets the “last gaze”?

Having used myself as a model since a long time, I wanted to develop further the notions of the artist’s gaze, the model and the self-portrait of an artist. Last summer I met two young painters, Jan Neva and Teemu Korpela. They have studied at the Academy of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg, where the academic tradition of painting the nude still prevails.

In art history one can find a type of image where the painter presents himself with the model in the studio (and often looks over his shoulder towards the spectator). I wanted a situation where it is the model who presents herself posing as a model. Traditionally the painter watches the model and the model watches nobody. In our “unholy model session” the roles get mixed: the model becomes an image-maker and the painters become models. In principle the situation is similar to that where I’m making a solitary self-portrait, facing the camera on a tripod, and showing with the cable release that I’m at the same time author and subject, artist and model. However, the painters at work concretize the posing as even more real. Furthermore, I was curious to hear how it would affect the painters’ work when the model looks back at them, observes the observers, makes in turn their portrait with her own medium.

I was posing for Jan and Teemu in the Kalervo Kallio Ateljee in Helsinki, November-December 2009. They were painting me and I was filming us at the same time. I realised a series of nine photographs (medium format analog c-prints) and a HD digital video with two cameras.

Elina Brotherus, December 28, 2009

ARTIST AND HER MODEL (2005–2011)

I have been doing self-portraits for so many years that my own figure has become like a familiar sign, like a word in my vocabulary. After Model Studies and Études d’après modèle, danseurs, the series Artist and her model focuses on the fact that here the artist and the model are one and the same.

The art historian Susan Bright writes about the work:

Her deep understanding of art history has a paradoxical effect in that you consider her as a person but also a model. In her photographs there is a closeness you feel to her but also a cool conceptual distance. This complicates viewing the work in terms of self-portraiture, landscape or a diary, and so photographs that can often appear quiet and straightforward on first encounter become denser and laden with histories as you spend time with them. The ‘backstories’ which lie behind the beautiful, lush compositions are exacerbated as she reaches that somewhat terrifying ‘mid career’ point and looks back on her life as an artist.

[Susan Bright: NOW AND THEN, published in Elina Brotherus: Artist and her Model, Le Caillou bleu, Brussels 2012]

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MEANINGLESS WORK (2016 ongoing)

After 20 years of using myself in my pictures, I felt that I had done all the poses I could possibly do with my body. The way out of this dead end came through Fluxus. In 2016 at my nomination for the Prix Elysée, I started to use Fluxus event scores and other written instructions by artists as the basis of new work. Meaningless Work is a still on-going series. It keeps me curious and allows me to make new discoveries, all while continuing to do what I know best. It enables me to get back both in front and behind the camera. Citing Arthur Köpcke [Fluxus artist]: “People ask: Why? I ask: Why not!”

THE BALDESSARI ASSIGNMENTS (2016 ongoing)

The American artist John Baldessari proposed a list of “art ideas” to his indecisive students at CalArts [California Institute of the Arts, Santa Clarica, USA] in the 1970s. I started to use these ideas as assignments in my own teaching. I saw how much fun the students had doing the Baldessari assignments and thought that I want to do them, too. In 2016 at my nomination for the Prix Elysée, I started to use different instructions like Fluxus event scores and Baldessari’s ideas as the basis of new work. The Baldessari Assignments is a still ongoing series.

RÈGLE DU JEU (2016–2017)

Règle du jeu is the result of my Carte blanche PMU prize in France 2017. The work was first exhibited at Centre Pompidou and simultaneously published as a monograph by Filigranes editions. I continue to use Fluxus event scores as a starting point, but I have expanded the idea of the score and allowed myself to be influenced by a range of artists including film makers, photographers, painters and poets. In these performative and somewhat absurd pictures I am accompanied by dancer and choreographer Vera Nevanlinna.

MODEL STUDIES (2002–2008)

Model Studies continues from where my earlier series The New Painting (2000–2004) ends. Even more pronouncedly than the previous series, Model Studies is not about personal stories nor a documentary about someone's life. The images have been constructed for visual reasons. My attention is attached to light, colours, the rhythm of the masses, and to subject matters with classical notions. The figure often turns her back to the spectator. This gesture invites to a peaceful contemplation, not to a confrontation.

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SEBALDIANA. MEMENTO MORI (2019)

Before I first visited Corsica, I read a collection of text fragments by W. G. Sebald, building blocks for a book about Corsica that was left unfinished at his premature death. Sebald as a writer is highly unusual and difficult to classify: between essayist, novelist and historian, he is scholarly without being dry, poetic without sentimentality, touching on deeply humane topics of post-war Europe with a great sense of historicity. His use of photographs within his books has inspired many artists.

Sebald writes about a certain hotel on the steep red cliffs overlooking the village of Piana on the Western coast of Corsica. His narrator goes to swim from a close-by secluded beach and nearly doesn't make it back to shore. In the village cemetery he observes the small weeds that grow between the tombstones, nature's modest ones, unplanted and unplanned, in stark contrast with the looked-after but austere cemetery plantations of Sebald's native Germany. He then talks about the relatively recent use of cemeteries in Corsica. The old habit was to bury the dead in a beautiful spot in their own land, perhaps under a particular tree, or on the slope behind the house where they could continue to contemplate the view on their ancestral territory. The poorest ones who had no land were simply put in a common grave or in ravine in the mountains.

Sebald became my guide to Corsica. I went to places he mentions: the forest of Aitone and the massif of Bavella, the hotel, the beach and the cemetery in Piana and its backcountry with sculptural rock formations. I was remembering my dead. I looked for places so beautiful that I would like to bury them there, were I Corsican. I collected humble weeds at the cemetery of Piana to make a herbarium.

My father was a hobby photographer and gave me my first camera. When my mother was widowed at the age of 37, she went to art school and had four years of fulfillment. I'm a photographer because of my father, but because of my mother I'm an artist.

My mother died four years later at the age of 41. She was born the same year as Sebald but died 16 years before him. Recently I found some aquarelle paper that she hadn't had time to use. The sheets had suffered from humidity, were spotted, partly moldy. It is this paper that I used to create my Herbarium Pianense, the cyanotype herbarium of the cemetery. Thus this work became an homage not only to the Island of Beauty and to my favourite writer, but also to my mother, Ulla Brita Brotherus, née Sommar (1944-1985).

[Commissioned by Centre Méditerranéen de la Photographie, Bastia, Corsica 2019]

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ONE MINUTE SCULPTURES (2017 ongoing)

I began to do One Minute Sculptures after Erwin Wurm as a continuation for works I had been producing since 2016, using instructions by other artists as a starting point for my new pieces. I had delved into Fluxus and John Baldessari's List of Art Ideas. Erwin Wurm's One Minute Sculptures are also meant to be participatory pieces, and they seemed perfect for staged, performative photography. I started the series while invited to an artist residency at the Museum Kunst der Westküste on the German island of Föhr in 2017. I continued the next year at the construction site of the legendary Parisian department store La Samaritaine, invited to produce new work to their collection. The culmination came when I was working for a solo show at Kunst Haus Wien. For the occasion, Erwin Wurm himself accepted to pose together with me for some One Minute Sculptures at his studio outside Vienna.

Pia Littmann and André Bischoff write in the exhibition catalogue »Made on Föhr. Photography from the Artist-in-Residence Programme« (Museum Kunst der Westküste and Michael Imhof Verlag, Wyk auf Föhr 2021):

“In 2017 Brotherus discovered the principle of Austrian artist Erwin Wurm's (b.1954) One Minute Sculptures for her own practice as an artist. The idea consists of having people interact with (mostly) commonplace objects and assuming specific poses as they do so. As stated by the title, the performances last for one minute and are based on schematic sketches by Wurm, some of which are supplemented by brief written instructions. These frequently seek to produce amusing and even absurd-looking poses. In contrast to the Fluxus artists, Wurm's point of departure lies in sculpture and its expansion in space and time as well as the performative participation of the protagonists. Whereas his One Minute Sculptures are substantially planned for the exhibition space, the white cube, and are sometimes separated off through a pedestal, Brotherus transfers Wurm's ideas into the natural space of the landscape and translates his instructions into ingenious photographic compositions, which are permanently recorded and thus exceed the time limit of one minute. It is these photographs – and less the performance itself – which stand in the foreground for Brotherus.”

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