

Borderland

New installations and video works by Birgit Johnsen and Hanne Nielsen

By Gitte Ørskou, art director Aarhus Art Museum.

Birgit Johnsen's and Hanne Nielsen's video installation *Territoriale Udsagn* (Territorial Statements) is gripping in a quite elementary sense. The six women who take it in turn to narrate to the camera slowly involve us in their accounts, and we find it difficult to break out of them again. Captured by the ways in which the stories progress, rhythmically interrupted, delayed and repeated by the artists' stylistic artifices (varied lighting and camera angles, crosscutting etc.) we listen and watch in breathless attention as the women's stories slowly unfold. They are stories about boundaries being erected. About the times when the women have encountered boundaries being set up and challenging their personal space and integrity.

We meet: The young woman whose friend was more concerned with her child than spending time with the woman herself. The Iranian girl who one day was confronted with the question of whether she was willing to accompany her parents back to Iran if the revolution got under way. The Faroese woman who one quite ordinary day suddenly had to defend her national identity to a woman who was a complete stranger to her. The woman who found herself giving a peripheral student friend a detailed account of her divorce. The young woman who is still tormented by the occasion when she was waiting for the bus one morning and in her self-absorption failed to find time to help an injured man who turned to her. And finally the African woman who is constantly being harassed by a man who lives in the flat below her because she refused his advances.

The women's stories range in content from the banalities of everyday life to existential accounts of feeling a stranger in an oppressive reality. Despite the gripping content of the stories, it is their form that dictates their effect. Just as bad timing and a couple of clumsy turns of phrase can quickly turn a good story into a dreary affair, the accounts of these women are also profoundly dependent on the form in which they are presented. Form and content dictate each other in *Territorial Statements*. The women have been asked to narrate the same episode four times at intervals of several days. Each time they have been filmed with a new camera angle and with fresh lighting. The extended period seems to modulate the women's accounts, which unobtrusively

change and create the potential for reflections that steal into the stories one by one. Perhaps the different settings, in which the light changes from that of a sober interrogation to the theatrically dramatic, has had an influence on way in which the women present their stories. They were quite alone in the room with the camera, which ran for a pre-determined time extending beyond that needed for the actual story. The long, restless wait after the account has ended, during which the women hum, sigh, cough, are lost in thought, constitutes an essential part of Johnsen's and Nielsen's artistic material.

In the video installation, this artistic material has been cut and put together and projected on two free-hanging screens placed slightly obliquely to each other. Just as the cinematic *framing* allows the women space and does not force them into a narrow framework, so the immaterial projections also have a liberating potential. Nor is the portrait of women with which Johnsen and Nielsen present us entirely straightforward. We have to move around in front of the skewed screens, inquiringly and slightly clumsily, because the entire account cannot be grasped in a single, laid-back gaze. The two screens present us with two different sequences which are rhythmically crosscut, allowing the narratives to merge into each other so that the women's very personal and intimate stories never stand alone, but are constantly disturbed by the woman telling her story on the other screen.

Distance and Nearness

In *Territorial Statements*, we, as viewers, constantly move back and forth between a feeling of intimacy and nearness that brings us *quite close* to the women speaking, and then the distance that inevitably asserts itself as a result of the marked staging of the video installation as a whole.

The accounts immediately provoke a response. Silent and absorbed, we allow ourselves to be drawn into the stories and the reflections they bring in their train. Even tiny details stand out with an almost physical presence: as when the Faroese woman bites her lip, raises her eyes to the heavens and slowly turns round in her chair in the midst of her gripping account of the verbal attack to which she was exposed – or when, for a split second, the aggrieved woman refers to her friend as being "bloody irritating" in an abrasive and slightly breathless outburst in the midst of her otherwise laconic account.

This physical presence, which affects us like a confidence made with a sigh of resignation, is in sharp contrast to the obvious staging of the installation. The curiously institutional surroundings in which the women find themselves, together with the certainty that they are alone in front of the camera with no sparring partner to whom they can tell their stories, inevitably creates a distance from the actual accounts. At the same time the camera angles and the lighting, which several times mimic the many stylistic artifices of television, are so obvious that the intimacy we thought was part and parcel of the narrative, is suddenly revealed to be a construction. Not only the women's own accounts but also our reading and interpretation of them change according to the camera angle and the lighting, which add new meanings to them. The thought soon strikes us that it *could* in fact all be a fiction, a purely staged performance without any authenticity. The borderline between documentarism and fiction becomes blurred. Because we ourselves are endowed with a heavy visual baggage, an experience that comes into play with lightning speed and makes us interpret situations in accordance with the visual patterns that once and for all have created a consensus, our interpretation of the images and the cinematic narrative can never be "uncontaminated". When the woman who told about her divorce to a quite unfamiliar fellow student is suddenly portrayed in a dim, contrastive light with the sharp shadows of the venetian blinds outlined in the room, the cinematic image is drawing on the many thrillers that have made such lighting into their emblem. We ourselves feel doubt as to the authenticity of the interpretation. Form and content cross swords and place us in an existential no-man's land, where we do not feel safe.

Johnsen and Nielsen have created a story about boundaries. But rather than defining those boundaries clearly the story is fashioned as a gentle flow that constantly veils, modulates and suggests the boundaries and their flexibility. The stories about the day when the women confronted their boundaries are repeated again and again with ever-increasing reflection and doubt – from various angles and in different lights – all of which softens and nuances the points made by the stories. Johnsen's and Nielsen's formal artifices, which cut the stories into small bits and put them into new frames, seem generally to be a constant visual interpretation that may well be faithful to the contents of the stories, but which at the same time both add and subtract from the intimate stories that we can immediately recognise. The focus is all the time shifting between from the two accounts that appear alongside each other. The points are repeated in new guises, and the stories are told over and over again. The

sense of time has ceased; chronology has been abandoned. Instead, we are met by a flow of images that holds us fast in a sustained fascination between distance and nearness.

Challenging the boundaries – I'm so fucking happy

The video *I'm so fucking happy*, sows similar doubt regarding authenticity. Whereas *Territorial Statements* progresses rhythmically and smoothly in time with our slow, physical experience of the work, *I'm so fucking happy* is far more direct and insistent. A number of women passing by in a Danish town have been asked to say, "I'm so fucking happy" to the camera. In a brief, precise montage, which makes its points like pistol shots, Johnsen and Nielsen have assembled clips of the many ways in which the women say this. While some of them make the statement with great enthusiasm and relish, others are expressionless and mechanical. Nevertheless, most finish off their performance with a little smile and a nod in the direction of the camera, apparently seeking confirmation that they have done their job well enough.

The expression is itself ambiguous. The word "fucking" has slipped into the positive statement, giving it an ironical twist. The statement as such becomes an external, artificial construction not based on any real feeling but rather on a performative gesture – an act. Because the setting is so obvious with the repetition of the same sentence by the various women, the statement stands increasingly as a hysterical and strident sustention of an external image that undermines its own credibility.

The large number of short, spasmodic clips assail our eyes with a hyperventilating and insistent mass of images that not only cross the boundary between public and private, but also between authenticity and construction. With a reconciling twinkle in their eyes, Johnsen and Nielsen here produce the results of their studies of the boundaries we try every day to retain in our dealings with the world around us. Only too well, we recognise the feeling of putting on a happy smile even when things look at their worst. So the encounter with this work creates an jolt in the stream of images we call our reality.

It is difficult not to be affected by these works by Johnsen and Nielsen. The viewer's expectations and feelings are part of the register constituting their artistic material. In their installations set up in specific localities in Esbjerg, where they have arranged lighting and fixed cameras in a number of passageways through which the

locals walk every day, the viewer is quite literally and physically drawn in. The people who frequently pass through without really reflecting on their surroundings suddenly have their attention drawn to the space through which they are walking. The camera equipment reveals the boundaries in the town – and thus the way in which people enter it – with all the associations with the troubles and checks of a society under constant surveillance that come with the camera. In one of the passageways, Johnsen and Nielsen have placed a spotlight that suddenly puts the passer-by at the centre, while another is clad in a yellow light that attracts people walking by. In both places, monitors have been installed in which people see themselves as they pass by.

As in our everyday dealings with the world we often go about without thought and only briefly gain an intuition of our real being in the world, Johnsen's and Nielsen's imperceptible artifices in the town's passageways produce a fleeting moment of understanding in people as they go through. Suddenly they have a sense of themselves *in* the world. The boundaries between the individual and the world are both marked out and expanded. The jolt that creates fertile ground for reflection and understanding is all at once a reality. We have moved out of the world to which we are accustomed and into a borderland where anything can happen.