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Anna-Stina Treumund in *Drag*

ANNA-STINA TREUMUND FIRMLY positions herself as an artist who is dedicated to carving out a visual, conceptual and discursive space for emerging lesbian subjectivities and queer feminist voices in post-socialist Estonia. Her desire to make herself visible as a lesbian springs up from a void, an absence of any publicly accepted/acceptable representation of sexual minorities in this context. More broadly, her art seeks to explore what it feels like to be a feminist and a queer subject in post-socialist Eastern Europe. The so-called former Eastern Europe continues to be something of a gap in transnational feminist and queer studies, if not entirely a non-place or non-region, where feminism and the LGBTQI movement are still said to be in the process of emergence, often measured against the yardstick of Western histories and genealogies. In many ways, Treumund's art resonates with recent discussions of queer time and queer temporalities (e.g. Halberstam 2005; Dinshaw et al. 2007; Freccero 2007; Freeman 2010), feminist generations and telling stories of feminist theorizing and activism (Hemmings 2011), asking what it might mean to be still continuously cast as "lagging behind," as a belated copy of the West.

Admittedly, Anna-Stina Treumund's artwork has challenged me

as someone who came into feminist and gender studies in academia through Western contexts where I felt oddly placed as a woman from Estonia, from that ambivalent, in-between, "zeugmatic space" (Mudure 2007), a "semiperiphery" (Blagojević 2009), a "void" (Tlostanova 2010; Tlostanova 2012), that is the former Eastern Europe. When I first saw *Drag*, I thought it looked a lot like something I might have already seen a long time ago. Perhaps at an exhibition, most certainly in a book, a website, a film. There was something very familiar about the striking pose, something recognizable about the drag, the disguise. It could have been a photograph taken by someone else, some other time, somewhere else. There was a strong desire to dismiss it as just something that had already been, as something out-dated even before it appeared, because in many of the Western academic contexts I talked about her work, she was perceived as "so 80s." My first impulse was to rescue her from the "lag" discourse until it became clear to me that in fact I might be the one who needs to be rescued from the position of the "Western" critic.

I couldn't get this photograph out of my head. Eventually, I came to see it as a poster of sorts for Treumund's first solo exhibition *You, me and everyone we don't know* (Tallinn Art Hall Gallery, March 2010) where it was first exhibited. It became an iconic image for me, a visual statement that epitomizes the main theme of this exhibition and the artist's journey towards claiming a lesbian identity. It is one of her first self-portraits where I can really see she is confident. She claims her space and does so powerfully. She is as if drawing a circle around herself with her body, marking the time and space she inhabits. *I am here and now!* For the first time, she dares to show her face to the public in her photographs, to stare right into the eyes of the viewers, to put herself on the pedestal.

What is striking about the image is the way in which it chronicles

the act of taking a photograph, a performance, rather than showing a two-dimensional print of a subject. This is manifested through the cord that the artist is holding on to which indicates that she is the one recording the carefully crafted and posed image. This photograph is characterized by direct address – its subject looks directly at the camera, at the viewers, fixing us with its rather arrogant-looking stare. Since there is no doubt about the image being posed and performed, since it is a far cry from an ethnographic recording of objectifying "presence," we know we are being addressed directly. She has climbed that stool to make a statement. She refuses being a subject "captured" on film. She is a subject who is capturing you: you are its other, through which she defines herself with a vengeance. Your presence is acknowledged. This is a world where to perform is to control. This photograph is an image of fantasy – it represents the dream of total control, the icy demeanour of mastery, like a *femme fatale* preserved on film, the classic phallic woman.

Typically, photographic work that documents the lives of drag queens, cross-dressers and others who are regarded as sexual or gender deviants is characterized by its voyeurism, in which "the drag queen is presented as a debased theatrical personality alongside ageing strippers and denizens of carnival sideshows" (Blessing 1997, 96). These photographs satisfy the voyeur's appetite for the other, for the unusual and the unimaginable. However, since the subjects of such photographs are often performers or at least aware that they were being photographed, this does not necessarily come off as predatory.

Anna-Stina Treumund certainly plays along with the theatricality of her eccentric drag queening/drag kinging performance. What distinguishes Treumund and the drag queens in, for instance, Nan Goldin's well-known photographs is that for Anna-Stina, this is fantasy play, a reference to, and a way to connect with, the so-called

queer lives elsewhere, in other times. She plays dress-up specifically for this image. It is not her everyday surroundings, her everyday life. Through mixing and matching references to queer visual cultures elsewhere she is constructing her own place within the visual economies of otherness to which she arrives almost alone in her home context and as a latecomer in the Western context. With this self-portrait, she challenges people's need to categorize others and feels liberated, if not to say euphoric, to play with fantasy images, fantasy personas. She invites the viewer to contemplate the realm of photography that delights in the documentation of the unusual, allowing the viewer to stare, to ponder without shame: "Is it a man? Is it a woman? Does this person really exist?"

It should be underlined that Anna-Stina Treumund's artworks are often ripe with intertextuality. The citational tactics she uses are always in dialogue with the historical context of Estonia, as well as Western feminist and queer theories, activist and art practices. They are embedded in her embodied experience of her immediate surroundings, the things she reads or the artworks she finds inspiring. *Drag* has no clear referent, no person in particular that the artist is trying to morph herself into. It is not about copying or achieving likeness to one singular character, it is more about playing with a mixture of references, a plethora of types and citations that have served as an inspiration for Treumund. For example, she evokes a wide range of types from characters in Nan Goldin's drag queens from the 1970s to 1990s in New York, to Malvina, the blue-haired puppet from Soviet children's story (which I remember from the early 1980s), to Mamyshev-Monroe's impersonation of Marilyn Monroe in the 2000s, in particular his iconic poster for *Gender check: femininity and masculinity in the art of Eastern Europe* exhibition (opened in 2009 in Vienna, it was the first comprehensive

study of Eastern European art dealing with gender roles).

These citations are all temporally charged. With regard to my interest in exploring temporality and the way in which Anna-Stina Treumund's art conceives of the "lag" discourse associated with the former Eastern Europe, I am tempted to read all these intertextual layers in *Drag* as a specific mode of disidentification in the way José Esteban Muñoz uses this term (Muñoz 1999). Treumund is not simply following the path of a "good subject" towards a clear and linear identification with the Western discursive feminist and queer discourse. Neither is she a "bad subject" who entirely resists and rejects the images and identificatory sites that are available through the hegemonic Western discourse that dominates current global understandings of feminist and queer politics and artistic practices. Instead, through applying a mixture of intertextual references, she deals with the dominant Western discourses of feminist and queer activism through disidentification, neither willing to assimilate under the pressures of dominant ideology, nor trying to break free of its inescapable sphere. It is clear that it is not possible to step outside the so-called Western sphere of influence. As Eastern Europeans have always already been part of Western culture, no utopian outside exists, nor is it desirable. Instead, Treumund makes use of a strategy of "working on and against" (Muñoz 1999, 11). Following Muñoz then:

[T]o disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an

acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations. (12)

The imbrication of political subjectivities and geopolitical space that Treumund's artworks highlight allows for reconceiving questions of knowledge production and agency within discursive and visual economies. Instead of fretting over if and how Eastern Europe is "catching up," *Drag* and several of Treumund's later artworks hint at the latent presence of modern progress narratives and teleological hang-ups within feminist discourses that still keep up asymmetrical power relations between the East and the West. Her work thus functions as a catalyst for my own individual interventions in the hegemony of Western feminist theories, for which I have to be accountable for, as a feminist scholar from the former Eastern Europe, ambivalently positioned in the Western academia. Ultimately, engagement with Treumund's art leads me to argue that it is of utmost ethical and political importance to pay closer attention to geopolitical locatedness and processes of disidentification. A geopolitically grounded understanding of visual arts is a unique and powerful tool for producing new knowledge, alternative images, imaginaries, and it can solicit a new way of seeing and to do feminist theorizing.

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