

Dr. Bärbel Küster

Photographic Realities and the Three Ks: On Katharina Bosse's Series A Portrait of the Artist as Young Mother

Since the nineteen-nineties Katharina Bosse has intensively examined themes dealing with the human body, the externals of physical desire, and identities. Her series *Surface Tension* (2001) dealt with the staging of bodies, their accessories, and interior spaces alike. This was also the case in the series *Ten Rooms for Sex* (1999) and the internationally renowned series, *New Burlesque* (2003 onward), which has been exhibited in France, Germany, and the United States. The movement of *New Burlesque* drew from the old-fashioned tradition of nineteen-thirties' and forties' striptease, briefly reprised as the exploration of a space where women present their own images of their own bodies. The more than fifty women in this series, whom Bosse met in various cities in the United States, are amateurs. They are presented in their homemade stage outfits, in pin-up poses or doing dance moves that correspond with their stage personalities, sporting names such as "Lorelei Lane" or "Venus d'Milo." *New Burlesque* is about inhabiting one's own body and the possibilities of turning that into a liberating game, of breaking taboos and taking over authorship in places where women have traditionally been perceived as mere objects. The women gladly push back against the ways that women's feelings about their bodies have been forced out of the public eye, which is dominated by dematerialized bodies of models and media celebrities. *New Burlesque* is about having fun dressing up and undressing; it is about bodies, but is also a self-directed play with identities. Burlesque is converted into a kind of self-selected, self-made theater that is not subjected to economic interests. The women acquire something of the subversion that the burlesque theater has had since the sixteenth century. In the process the game opens up more free space than do discussions in women's magazines about models with ordinary body sizes, which ultimately remain commercialized.

In none of these pictures does the photographer operate against the people she is portraying; she is not exposing them, nor does she stylize them in an unfitting manner. Rather, she leaves it up to the stage, because "staging" is a central aspect, not just in

burlesque, but in photography in general. Bosse at first keeps a certain distance in these photos—around sixteen to twenty-six feet, about as much as is needed in a small theater. None of these photographs are set on a stage; they are staged outside, or in everyday places. Through this artistic intervention, the photographer creates a bridge to the ordinary worlds of these non-professional performers, embedding the game with the tantalizing bodies in, for example, the wide-open spaces of a western landscape flooded in sunlight.

And then, with her series *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Mother*, Bosse entered the stage herself, as it were. After six years in New York, she returned to Europe to take up a post as a photography professor in Bielefeld, Germany, in 2003. Her new job and the existential experience of having her own body change during pregnancy, as well as the social coding of motherhood, gave rise to questions that she explored in an eighteen-part series of large, analogue photographs taken between 2004 and 2009.

In *Tal* (Valley) we see the artist wearing an apron that features a picture of the burlesque performers. The apron, the child in her arms, the tub, and “laundry” on the line evoke associations with “the three Ks” of German culture: *Kinder*, *Kirche*, and *Küche* (children, church, and kitchen), which, when a woman has her first child, is still at least latently considered a possible female lifestyle in Germany (and something that is once again manifesting in politics). Tellingly enough, though, there is no laundry on the line, but the artist’s actual work. Toward the front, on the right, one recognizes a photograph that recalls Rembrandt’s portrait of *Susanna at Her Bath*, featuring the voluptuous shape of his wife Saskia. There she sits, a very small figure in the color room, on the banks of the river in the park, washing clothes. Besides her is a huge box of a famous German-brand laundry soap touted as a color preserver, but it cannot prevent the details here from nearly fading into the colored noise of analogue photography. Likewise, the other photographs on the line are miniatures touched with a sense of irony, taken during the first phase of the project, and later discarded. Behind the drying prints of the photos the photographer stands elevated on a hill, skillfully positioned on the threshold between light and shadow. Behind her in the valley opens up a green, early summer forest landscape flooded with light. One of the photos is falling from the line, marking the moment that the photograph was taken, Cartier-Bresson’s “instant décisif.” The

coincidence manifesting in such details—in the changing light, as well as through the staging with the children—signifies a symbolic loss of control, while at the same time it opens a window onto a world of contingencies.

Here, as in other photos in the series, Bosse succeeds in using the composition made up of light and color to contrast and interweave expectations of women, images of motherhood, artistic creations from throughout art history, and the reality of society with each other. In *Sumpf* (Swamp), for example, an almost Impressionist kind of light is cast upon the body of the expectant mother; reflections of the sun flicker in the forest, and her little daughter, all in green, fits perfectly into this play of light. At the same time the portrait becomes a torso: the body of the pregnant woman is sunk up to the hips in a swamp and unable to move, while the face and skin shimmer all the more subtly in the golden light. Degas and Renoir presented these kinds of female torsos, without, however, accompanying them with a sleepwalking little troll, before whose eyes the nymph here appears motionless. Since the child is at eye level, shifts in vision, expectation, and the power to act occur in an interplay involving the viewer, the woman in the swamp, and the child.

In the photo *Sand*, the light and color are precisely matched to the tone of the large sand dunes; just as warm sand almost feels like skin, the body reclining horizontally on top of the sand seems to almost disappear into it. The colors and bright light recall the works of Lovis Corinth, who often posed his female nudes in twisted positions, using his own unique form of realism to show the darker feet, unattractive veins, and skin discolorations. The weight of flesh and the heavy mass of an elongated body also interested painters such as Lucien Freud and Corinth. Here, once again, it is the little girl, sitting with great poise between the mother's legs, who comments upon and complements the uneasy pose of her mother: the woman's own sense of strangeness in response to the changes in her body, motherhood's experience of heaviness and immobility. Here, too, the material quality of the analogue photographs is crucial to the way the body is perceived: coarse-grained and porous, it furnishes skin and flesh with a haptic aura of imperfection.

The first photo in this series was *Heide* (Heath), and the pose here is distinctly more provocative, since allusions to the Roman wolf that nursed Romulus and Remus are mixed with a pose that has erotic or pornographic connotations. A blazing hot light falls on the kneeling woman's back and rear end, while the child in the cool shadow cast by her body nurses at her breast. The baby, still at a completely polymorphous age, seeks the mother's stomach with its little feet. Bosse presents herself with a motherly front and an eroticized back, a contradiction underlined by the interplay of light and shadow. These two sides of the woman are shown kneeling in a "primeval German" landscape, the heath, that echoes National Socialist aesthetic ideas in the background and connects to their conservative image of women. Bosse's paradoxical staging counteracts the three Ks with eroticism and realism.

Other photos from the series draw from Christian models of motherhood, especially depictions of the Madonna. *Wald* (Forest) attempts to expand the Madonna and child motif by adding a second child. Mother and child in *Zwei Bäume* (Two Trees) are part of a romantic allegory. The hoop in the hand of the kneeling mother encircles one dead tree and one verdant tree on the horizon. As a picture within a picture, it emblematically recalls the notion of successive generations; birth refers to life and death. The child's spontaneous gesture—its hand reassuring itself of the mother's breast—comments on this life cycle in a way as evident as incidental.

Zweige (Branches) features an enchanted scene beneath a tangle of mossy tree branches alongside a small stream, involuntarily reminding one of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, who drowned herself in the face of hopeless love. In his depiction of Ophelia, John Everett Millais, the Pre-Raphaelite painter, invented the prototype of the ethereal drowned corpse in 1852: a figure in cold greens and browns, flowers in the dead hand, floating in the water beneath some overhanging branches, it became an emblem of the Symbolist muses. In comparison, the mother in Bosse's photo floats in the water, which is obviously so pleasantly warm that one can comfortably read a book, while the children go their own ways, playing.

In *Kornfeld* (Wheat Field) the viewer's associations are masterfully mixed: wearing lingerie and patent leather boots, the "young mother," who is about five months

pregnant, squats in a wheat field in an provocative pose, her legs spread wide, in front of her daughter who is dreamily playing with a plastic horse. The hay on the field has been rolled into a large bale, a fresh wind blows through her dyed blonde hair, and her smiling gaze sweeps the horizon. Bright light falls on the bodies, while the expression of freedom and spaciousness, associations with Wild West movies or posters of James Dean, compete here with the halo formed by the round hay bale behind Bosse's head.

The realism that works upon these contradictions has many historical precedents; the contradictions themselves—between motherhood and the art world—are old, although they have rarely been so succinctly summarized by female artists. Bosse has worked out a unique position in the field of younger photographers. Her method of staging is combined with a pursuit of the documentary. Individual female photographers such as Rineke Dijkstra, with her series depicting women who have just given birth, or Renee Cox, with her strong women, have dealt with similar themes, but with a completely different goal. As a photographer, the key goal that Bosse pursued in the late nineteen-nineties was to find a new understanding of documentary photography, which lay somewhere beyond aestheticized misery and the intrusive advertising aesthetic that continually confronts us with sexist images. For Bosse—as well as for other photographers at that time—the solution to this question was to openly stage the image. For, as Bosse herself once stated: “By pretending to document things, photography creates a world of its own.” And for the artist as mother, this world has to react to the given, traditional role models and the expectations of our surrounding society.

The image is a permanent, individual kind of reenactment, a perpetual rediscovery of the self, using all of the means at hand, including documentation. This is why, in terms of photography theory, the series *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Mother* also explores new territory. It takes meticulous planning and great effort to take these analogue photographs, which Bosse creates with an assistant behind the camera. They are thoroughly staged; the only interference being the children's spontaneous actions or unpredictable changes in lighting conditions. At the same time the theme pursues the documentary impulse to record what is going on with one's own body during pregnancy and nursing, and how society's expectations and traditions help to

determine one's own relationship to one's children and to one's role as mother and artist, when there is no image of the female artist available. Throughout the scenes signs of change are recorded almost in passing: scars and marks appear on the mother's body, the roots of her natural hair color begin to show, and the children grow bigger all of the time. We see landscapes that frame these mutabilities, turning the staged scenes into symbolic places and providing a timeless background for the socially defined, oft-fractured "image" of woman. Consequently, the photos work on all possible levels of photographic imagery: as trace, index, projection, and—to invert Roland Barthes' statement—as message without a (pre-formulated) code.

When Stephen Dedalus, James Joyce's alter ego in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, finishes his Catholic-drenched youth in a Jesuit school and leaves to go to Trinity College, he finally begins to take his personal freedom as an artist more seriously than his religious doubts; a question from his friend Cranly about his mother, who has not played any role in the entire book before this moment, triggers this: "Whatever else is unsure in this stinking dunghill of a world, a mother's love is not. Your mother brings you into the world, carries you first in her body. What do we know about what she feels? But whatever she feels, it, at least, must be real." Acknowledging this reality gives the young artist the freedom to experience the world. Reflected in the situation of Joyce's novel, it becomes clear why Katharina Bosse's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Mother* works with often paradoxical constructs—the mother as artist stands right at the point, where, in Joyce, reality promises salvation.