Anneli Nygren. An appreciation

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> *What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.*
>
> Roland Barthes

The task of art, writes Roland Barthes, is not (as is commonly held) to *express the inexpressible*, but to *unxpress the expressible*. Barthes's play on words comes to me à propos the artist Anneli Nygren, whom I was asked to write this essay about. While many of Nygren's works invite reasonable ponderings in line with critical theory, the essence of her oeuvre and the effect it has on viewers remain largely the domain of mystery. I use these volatile terms—*essence, mystery*—with conscious (in)discretion, aware of the risk of involving the artist in a whole mythology of artistic singularity. Hence, also, the pertinence of my reference to Barthes, who, ever the relentless critic—of mythology, of ideology, of artistic authorship—yet made it a point to leave the mind ajar for unexpected intellectual (and sensual) disturbance, for the pleasures of the unknown, the anti-dogmatic and as yet unintelligible.

If ever there was a contemporary artist who merits flirtation with the phenomenology of enigma, it is Anneli Nygren. Yes, Nygren makes videos. Yes, her work has been shown at such venerable venues as *Chiasma Museum of Contemporary Art* (notably in the form of a "retrospective" in 1994) and *Helsinki City Art Museum* (in a 1998 exhibition, which also produced a dainty little book on the artist). But to simply call Anneli Nygren a video artist would be to reduce her to a polite image of contemporary art *comme il faut*. Nygren is both less and more than a video artist, perhaps the same way she is less and more than queer.

I once referred to Anneli Nygren as the Mona Lisa of Finnish contemporary art (a banal analogy, granted, but you might get my drift once you meet the artist and see her works). Neurology, I gather, claims to have finally unveiled the secret behind the Mona Lisa: when viewed at a distance, Leonardo's creation smiles softly, when up close and personal, she frowns. This is simple neuroaesthetics, they say, and I'll leave it at that. But the discovery does make some kind of weird sense in Nygren's case. I, for one,

do not intend to get too close for comfort. Such scrutiny will inevitably take place when the artist is no longer with us, but meanwhile I prefer to embrace the enigma and flirt back at that artful soft smile.

But there are some aspects that call for discreet examination, for Nygren is so conspicuously... well, *different*, as an artist. It is rather in spite of her self that Nygren has come to represent the venerable institution of Contemporary Art. Nygren is, as it were, a folk artist. Yes, such a queer thing exists: a *folk video artist*. Not only does her work express a persistent fascination—indeed, merger—with the Popular (as opposed to the conceptual), it is also devoid of professional pretention, decidedly low-tech and was not originally intended for public consumption as "art."

When it does reach a sophisticated audience (which is increasingly the case since the 1990s), the initial impression is one of uncanny directness and naiveté, inducing a variety of reactions from downright irritation to nervous laughter—or a knowing giggle (from those who embrace the absurd). Such is the alchemy of concept: aesthetic directness translates into intellectual distance or loftiness as an initial, detached a- or be-musement quickly morphs into the knowing wink. At the same time, and more interestingly, the homely (the familiar, the easy, the straight) makes way for the *unheimlich*: the uncanny, the uneasy, the queer.

Lacking formal art education, Nygren has been making pictures—and music, and stuff—since she was in her early teens (did she ever stop being, at bottom, an engaged, creative fan?). She also writes, makes drawings and publishes

Anneli Nygren: Lazzarella Lovely Lesbian, Part of a series of drawings. Collection of Helsinki City Art Museum. Photo: Martiina Mäkinen.

Anneli Nygren: Untitled color pencil drawing.
Collection of Helsinki City Art Museum. Photo: Martiina Mäkinen.

magazines (with minimal circulation) that draw freely upon all these resources. The magnitude of her oeuvre may seem imposing, but take my word for it, it doesn't look the part. There is an unusually clear continuum (both stylistically and thematically) from her awkward childhood scrapbooks to her current work under the more self-conscious rubric of art.

As someone tending (by nature, it seems) toward the queer *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Nygren is a kind of female Warhol—minus the Factory. Not that Nygren doesn't have her own entourage of Beautiful People: the coterie of this self-made-woman-artist consists of her dear Aunt Orvokki (one Ms. Björkesten, who sadly passed away a few years ago), occasional relatives and friends, and of course her Barbie Dolls—a director's dream, they strike the fiercest poses, yet display no diva antics, and are cheap. (As happens, I too have appeared in one of her films, and my partner, well he's a regular Anneli Nygren Superstar! But I digress...)

Of course Nygren had never heard of Andy Warhol—let alone his Factory or *Interview* magazine—when she started making pictures and editing magazines way back when (we do not actually know how old she is; she does not volunteer to tell us, and we prefer not to know. But we do have an early issue of her fabulous *Tytin Lehti*, dated 1971).

How to account for the queer aura that hovers about Nygren, an aura that this essay will inevitably contribute to by way of its publication context (*SQS*, as in Strictly Queer Stuff)?[1] For, truth be told, Nygren's work is not

1 Last time I recall a visual artist being discussed in *SQS*, it was Tom of

about sexuality (alas, I don't even think she's into girls, just into drawing them), nor is it about gender *per se*, though much of it is obvious commentary on—as well as delight in—"girls'" culture (a great deal of which has been known to double as gay men's culture). It strikes me that in some ways Nygren's art is actually more "gay" than "queer".[2]

This is to say (among other things) that her position bends—one might say: gaily—from the strictures of an intellectual-critical stance; her stance is rather an ironic happenstance, it entertains rather than scrutinizes ideological issues. Even though just about everything in Nygren, beginning from her multiple personas (as *Anne Lee, Tytti, Kitty, Cicca*, etc.) and the very notion of performed artisthood they engender, acquires the form of a queer citational masquerade, there is little ideological discourse to spoil the fun. (Ideological, Barthes reminds us, sides with straight, non-inverted.)

Yet, far from a simple fanatic embrace, something cracks, grates, disturbs the funny image—*breaks the studium*, as Barthes would say. Amidst all the sentimental gaiety, a wound opens up.

So if Nygren's work is queer, it is so in the most traditional sense: it is queer by bent. To put one's finger on the bend is tricky, as it does not boil down to sexuality or even gender (de)construction, nor is it simply a question of camp, the hip *outsider-insider* position it affords us viewers. Of course our initial camp attitude had a great deal to do with her cult status in the 1990s; then, as now, her work invited artful (hip) appreciation, offering as it did a curious combination of intellectual *Verfremdung* and affective empathy.

Nygren's work actually brings to mind Barthes's musings on *Bunraku*—paradoxically enough, for her work has little to do with the formal traditions of Japanese theatre. Barthes, drawing his inspiration from Brecht, describes this form of alienation, or expository, anti-illusionistic representation:

> *[It] separates the act from gesture: it exhibits the gesture, it allows the act to be seen; it exposes at once the art and the work – – . [T]he tackily clinging substances of Western theatre are dissolved: emotion no longer submerges everything in its flood but becomes matter for reading – – . A total spectacle, but divided, Bunraku excludes improvisation, doubtless aware that the return to spontaneity is the return to all those stereotypes which go to make up our 'inner depths'. Here we have – – the reign of the quotation – – . (Barthes 1977, 176, 177.)*

Finland. What might Tom of Finland and Anneli Nygren have in common? A whole lot, I think, and I'm not just referring to the fact that both love to draw bulging bodies. Both populate that grey area between popular culture and "fine" art where (personal) desire and (public) concept become inseparable; both embrace the stereotypical; both articulate (hide?) their "real" selves under the auspices of an artistic persona, which has become a trademark. Most of all, in both cases, artistic expression seems driven by a kind of aesthetic *Wiederholungszwang*, a perpetual pattern of repetition that seems to boil down to early experiences and fantasies. Thus, Tom presents us with hundreds of musclemen, while Anneli gives us hundreds of girlygirls, all variants of the same archetypal fantasy.

2 There is to my knowledge no conscious effort from Nygren's part to function in a queer context, no queer theoretical savvy to spice up her work, no statements of critical performativity or subversion or the likes. If and when present in Nygren, any rhetoric of ideological critique is itself jargonized and equipped with implicit quotation marks. Whether such perpetual quotation marks should be attributed to gaiety or queerness, or indeed some other form of estrangement, I leave open to debate.

To be sure, the reign of the transparent quotation is Anneli Nygren's domain. Or rather, it is her queendom. For there is, as well, that distinctly affective quality. It seems to arise from two basic factors, at creative odds with one another: first, the campy pleasure of being in the know (that shared giggle), and second, the more nervously blissful (dis)pleasure of not quite ever getting (to the bottom of) it. The latter affect stems partly from the position of voyeuristic complicity that Nygren (unwittingly, I suspect) offers the viewer.

For it is also herself, in all her troubling counter-photogenie, that the artist gives us perspicuous glimpses of. That "self" does not quite reflect the polished presence of Artist/Director/Occasional Actor; instead of conceptual cameo, we get the queer charisma of a somewhat geeky (hence arresting and all the more lovable) human being—entertaining the role of filmmaker doing the role of artist—but with a real (as opposed to mock) sincerity that all but does away with the intellectual quotation marks that had previously emerged to structure our experience.

In a sense, Nygren's is an utterly romantic art, for it allows the viewer to savour aspects of authenticity and originality, notions that most art today more or less consciously evades. In Nygren, artistic originality becomes an issue—perhaps even *the* issue—precisely because one realizes so quickly that this is not the (in itself rare) case of an artist who achieves authenticity, but the (even rarer) case of an authentic who achieves art. It is this ambiguous—artful-artless/fabricated-real/art-life—wavering that makes

Anneli Nygren posing as the fictitious pop star Cicca in the video "Voit maksaa Suomen rahalla" (Feel Free to Pay in Finnish Currency).

Still photo: Orvokki Björkesten.

Nygren's work—which can never quite be separated from her artist's persona—so utterly fascinating, and so decidedly queer.

In this world of articulate agendas and sophisticated statements, I'm glad there is Anneli Nygren. Let us hope that the art world does not manage to straighten her out, turn her into a bona fide artist.

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