Between Visibility and Invisibility
by Camilla Jalving

The scarf reaches all the way down to the neck. Tied over the chin, mouth and the tip of the nose is a piece of material secured with a ribbon around the neck. Another piece, held in place in the same manner, covers the forehead, while the hair is hidden beneath a second scarf. Through a small slit, one can see the eyes – her eyes. But she herself is looking away. This picture is part of Trine Søndergaard’s series of photographs Strude taken on the small Danish west coast island of Fanø in the period 2007-2009. It was here that in former times the women were so attired, like the woman in the photograph, with a ‘strude’ – a hood which covered the upper and lower parts of the face as protection against the sun and wind when they were working in the fields. They also wore a dress covered with symbols, parts of which accompanied them throughout their entire lives, from when, as young girls, they reached confirmation age and were appropriately veiled, until when, as married women, they were supposed to mark their marital status and indicate important stages of life to the world around them. In this way, the costume of the Fanø women spoke its own language. It had its own alphabet and its own grammar, which only the initiated were able to decode. For the uninitiated it remained a shield, an armour against wind and weather and inquisitive gazes. Today the dresses and accompanying hoods, which are only part of the working clothes, are worn on special occasions only, such as the annual Sønderho Day, the second Sunday in July. On that day the town’s inhabitants and visitors on holiday put on the old costumes to transform themselves at a stroke into exotic creatures from a bygone age. It is on such occasions that the artist Trine Søndergaard has come with her camera to a temporarily-devised studio in the Lorenzen house in Sønderho, and once in the attic of the library in Nordby, to photograph women of all ages wearing the dress, scarf and hood.

Time as a Condition
One should imagine pleasantries, giggling and creaking floors and an atmosphere of easy chaos and confusion as one woman after another stepped in front of the camera’s lens, sat down in the chrome-plated chair and, for a brief moment, made herself an image before the artist’s gaze. Because this was how the pictures were taken, says Søndergaard, one day in her studio, where the Strude pictures stand against the wall and the exhibition as yet only exists as a doll’s house model before which we stand, and into which we look down. However, the series of pictures bears witness to something quite different: to calm, concentration and involvement. They are so extremely muted, so minimal. It is as if, time stands still, which in a sense it naturally does, since the photograph as a point of departure is a freezing of a specific moment. Even so, it seems as if here time stands more still. Søndergaard herself talks about wanting to photograph a condition: time measured as a form of “duration”, which the French philosopher Henri Bergson has termed “la durée”. This “duration” is interconnectedness, it is the way in which past, present and future interpenetrate each other in consciousness. The “duration” is time experienced and not time understood as the ticking passage of seconds. That time stands more still than normally in Søndergaard’s photographs may be owing to the motif, which, in itself, permits past and present to meet in the same moment, and by this token seems to wipe out the time which has passed since the women of Fanø were actually dressed in the manner recorded here. It may be due to the rhythmic repetition of the faces which show that which is both the same and different: repetitions with infinitesimal variations. It may be due to the circumstance that the photographs have been taken with a wide lens aperture which makes the depth of field relatively small. This means that not all areas in the photographs are of a uniform sharpness. There are places which, in themselves, are more concentrated than others and which hold the gaze more than others. But it may also be owing to the fact that none of the women look directly at the beholder. That none of the women
meet the beholder’s gaze, which would hold us firmly in the encounter for a moment – as beholders. Quite the reverse, in fact, we are permitted to forget time, pace and ourselves. Perhaps.

**The Depersonalised Portrait**

At first glance the photographs recall portraits: a series of portraits made in roughly the same format, from approximately the same angle and with about the same amount of light. In reality there is nothing preventing us actually calling the photographs portraits. Not unless by “portrait” one understands the personal depiction and psychological reconnaissance of another person’s mind, disposition and conduct. For if this is what one goes in search of then the *Strude* pictures are not portraits. They are rather measured registrations of a particular typology – the result of a controlled location in a setting (established by the artist, who directs the woman on the chrome chair in the Lorenzen house) the consequence of which is not portraiture, but the reverse, a depersonalisation of the portrait as a genre. Such a depersonalisation does not, however, turn the photographs into a science, an anthropological study. They are not preparatory work for a larger folkloristic tome dealing with the development of costume in Southern Denmark with particular reference to Fanø and other low-lying islands; how the costume really fitted on the wearers; what Fanø women really looked like in those days. Some of the women wear make-up and earrings, which is more intentional than fortuitous. And anyway, the chrome chair intrudes in every case as a visual reminder of the present – our own time. Sønderho 2009.

**Visibility/Invisibility**

But if the *Strude* pictures are not a science, what are they? Artistic statements which contain a certain style, which create a mood, which have an effect on the beholder. This could be one answer. Or one might call them artistic investigations of visibility and invisibility: of the power and the impotence of the gaze; of the relationship between sight and knowledge. In our Western culture sight and knowledge are closely interwoven. To see, we say, is to know. This logic of sight was fundamental as far back as Antiquity, when sight was accorded precedence as the human being’s primary sense. If, like Søndergaard, one challenges the relation between sight and knowledge, one also, therefore, challenges a deeply rooted oculocentric culture, i.e. a culture based on the eye and the gaze as a primary source of both wisdom and power. Look, for a moment, at the sequence of women. Basically speaking, there is not much to see. Or, rather there is much to see, but that which one can see is, paradoxically enough, that which one is not permitted to see. To see properly. The women’s hair, for instance, is concealed under a layer of scarves. Normally it is the hair which often tells the story. Perms, stripes of colour and layers bear witness both to time and place. The absence of any such references means that the *Strude* pictures could just as easily be Sønderho 2009 as Jan Vermeer’s Delft of the 17th century. If the function of the scarf is to conceal, it also displays that which it conceals. The scarf veils and unveils things at one and the same time. Its function as a sign is, probably unintentionally, to point out that which we are not permitted to see. This is a common point but it is of no less importance in relation to Søndergaard’s photographs, which so demonstratively conceal – and in their veiling unveil. They are the motif which shows itself, but in displaying they also conceal themselves. It is in this aspect that the tension of the photographs is to be found – between the visible and the invisible: the obvious and the represented. One might say that the photographs in that sense are visualisations of an “invisibility”. They render something visible, but that which they make visible is precisely the attempt at the opposite. It is the masking and veiling which is the motif of the photographs. It is the *Strude* which, as a kind of garment is fundamentally anti-ocular, its practical function momentarily put aside. As a sign, it represents a screen. A screen which protects, but which also screens off and thus blocks off every exchange of gazes.
The Look from the Other

“What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects”1 Thus writes the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in 1973 in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The gaze he has in mind is not a visible gaze, it is not the gaze from these women, but rather the gaze imagined by the subject. It is the gaze of the world, the gaze of the Other, through which, “I enter light,” as Lacan puts it. Be this as it may, Lacan’s understanding of the formation of the subject is interesting in relation to Søndergaard’s photographs – for the very reason that Lacan links the subject’s progression to the sight to such a degree. In this way he draws out precisely the sense which the Strude photographs challenge. He expounds the subject’s drama of becoming which might unfold between beholder and photograph: between that which sees and that which does not want to be seen; that which looks away and does not meet my gaze. It is a point with Lacan that this relation between the subject and the gaze of the world contains a blind spot; that the fundamental economy of sight is in this way determined by a loss, and subsequently defined by a longing which cannot be satisfied. I cannot, either now or in a possible future, see myself from the point from which others see me. This fundamental condition seems to force its way particularly into the encounter with the Strude pictures. They are filled with blind spots. A blind eye looks out and small blind mirrors are set in the Fanø women’s elaborate head-coverings, which, with their profusion of flowers, go so far beyond whatever one might understand by the term “hat”. They are blind to the degree that they reflect nothing: neither the surroundings nor any of the other women who can be imagined lining up to be photographed. Not even the photographer herself, who must otherwise be thought of as an easy victim of the mirrors’ reflecting surfaces. Instead they appear as surrealistic ruptures in the realism of the photographs; as empty sockets, blind pupils which, like the women themselves, refuse to meet the gaze of the beholder. “Look at me,” I think, as I pass – in my mind – “through the doll’s house.” If, in the traditional view, power and knowledge are attributed to the observing part of the exchange of gazes, Søndergaard’s Strude pictures seem to turn the relationship around. Power becomes impotence when, observed, it writes itself out of the logic of the economy of sight: when photography breaks its fundamental promise to register the world and instead concerns itself with invisibility rather than visibility. Instead of giving the beholder an unobstructed view of the issue and satisfying the desire of the gaze to see and be seen, Trine Søndergaard sets up obstacles in the visible field. It is, surprisingly enough, these obstacles which make it so infinitely more interesting to see: to attempt to see and be seen. The Strude pictures speak in low voices. They speak quietly, but seldom has one heard such a resounding quiet.


Published in Trine Søndergaard, Strude, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, 2010