



SOMETHING SO VERY WRONG

A conversation between
Torbjørn Rødland and Gil Blank



Gil Blank:

***When thinking
about your work,
I've often
come back to
two
related readings,
what I would
refer to
as the retarded
and the perverse.***



We can eventually get into the way these two indicate an almost immediate mind / body (or maybe brain / loins) opposition, but before we do, I want to think for a moment about what these ideas mean in terms of your images.

To begin with, I would suggest that perversity in this case refers to an awareness of how 'wrong' something can be, or feel, or be positioned in context. That positioning is then coupled with a counter-intuitive urge to invert its obscurity, to render it as seemingly normal, perhaps even banal. These are general statements of course, which is quite to the point: photography's alleged documentary specificity is something you seem to play down, as you never directly approach subject matter that we would perhaps regard as immediately transgressive. Rather, the perversity lies in a much broader or diffuse sense: when looking at your pictures, I've often felt that there is something so very wrong about them, but I couldn't for the life of me be pressed to describe precisely what that is. I think instead that the visceral feeling of wrongness, and the consequent sensation of the perverse, comes from the contrasts found across the broader span of the imagery, an alien mixture of pop culture emblems, spiritual foreboding, the anguish of ineffable yearning, and plain visual delight. In fact, I would call that an abbreviated list of the competing impulses and emotions I can detect.

An immediate question arises then, in response to a decidedly pictorial practice — one, in other words, that makes no excuse for its complete dedication to the potentialities of its visual nature — of this nature in the 21st century. One oppositional axis of contemporary practice runs between an anti-material, anti-aesthetic commentary on the abuses of culture industry, and the spectacular, indulgent urge for creative participation in that same culture. At the extremes, it is the opposition of an indignant moralism and a cynical resignation. Perhaps this feeling of the perverse has its source in your proposal of a number of conflicting elements from this divide. So first, I must ask: how do you pursue a practice intrinsically tied to the visual representation of cultural experience without submitting to its excess?

Torbjørn Rødland:
I believe
I have an orientation
towards what
the Japanese call *dame*,
or the unacceptable.
Dame is a key term for
understanding
Japanese *otaku* culture,
in which men make
themselves socially
unacceptable by
spending too much time
obsessing over supercute
cartoon characters.



The first art I thought I could understand was North American postmodern photography – the kind of pictures made by Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Jeff Wall, James Welling, and Sherrie Levine. I may just have misunderstood a lot of it... It was obvious that Cindy Sherman loved becoming all of those characters. I didn't see the negative attitude towards image culture that some critics stressed. I also read Hans-Peter Feldmann's 1994 book *Voyeur* as a celebration of the richness and beauty of popular photography. It's one of my favorite artist's books.

So though I never felt abused by the culture industry, I don't think it's my job to contribute to it either. You cannot defend paparazzi shots of Mischa Barton eating ice cream, and that's part of their power and appeal. I don't believe I can, or even should, lift these kinds of photos directly into the artworld though, like Prince or Feldmann have done. My job is more to distill their mystery or contradiction, to purify their poetic juices. To re-do them my own way, without making them totally acceptable.

During my studies, I was afraid of 'submitting to the excess' that can be found even within art production, but I got over that. I couldn't find a collection of images that completely satisfied my needs, so I felt that there was clearly something for me to do, that I could make photographs that neither mocked nor ignored the images my life had been built around.

In 1973, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes gave a solid defense for perversions. As a twenty-year-old reading *Camera Lucida*, I didn't feel that Barthes could understand my struggle with photography. Getting away from the strong documentary tradition was just as important as getting away from controlled, consistent, conceptual strategies. But *The Pleasure of the Text*, which I just discovered last year, is something amazing. When Barthes wrote about his own art form, he was dead on. Despite being explicitly about text, I read the book as a defense for photographic pleasure; for images "that destroy, to the point of contradiction, their own discursive category, their genre".

GB: It's surprising to me to hear you cite members of the so-called 'Pictures' generation – Sherman, Prince, Levine, etc. – in reference to your work. I think some of their advocates would likely suggest that by making a photograph that you allege to be of your own construction, you reflexively demonstrate your co-optation by the larger culture. I admit I find that dogma to be a death-spiral, and, in any event, uninteresting.

TR: Some photographs are of my own construction and some are cover versions. Most are a coming together of direct observation and internalized popular myth.

GB: And this too entails a contradiction, that a depicted instance can somehow manifest personally lived experience, yet does so by channeling the tastier bits of the image trade. Which then raises the consequent danger of style, of the substitution of mood and attitude for the more rigorous attempt to generate the substance of content, and perhaps to determine meaning-exercises that, in themselves, I would ultimately equate with the determination to preserve a sense of personal dignity.

TR:

**I've noticed
that animals
tend
to confuse
dignity
and style.**

It's deeply encoded in us all. I respect these natural characteristics. I think making a photograph is a process of objectification, and to do it well you need a fastidious eye and a sense of style. In contemporary art we don't know quite how to discuss style, but it seems to be an essential element of a lot of work that is being made. But it's not hard to understand why style makes people uneasy. Bad art and fashion photography can be painfully stylish, and it can be tempting to throw out everything living in that bathwater.

GB: Let me try to put it another way:

**I don't find style
to be a useful
or even realistic
index of quality,**

first of all by virtue of the fact that its primary characteristic is built-in obsolescence. But more importantly, my reservation about style isn't, fittingly enough, one of taste – that fashion or design is vulgar – but more to do specifically with the too common failure of those who would sacrifice the great potentiality of photography's central paradox, its ambiguous plenitude of facticity, for aesthetic mannerisms that inevitably seek to essentialize. What passes as the lowest common denominator of a 'signature' very quickly (instantly, in fact) de-velops into metaphor or solipsism, the weakest of all creative modes.





I don't find much use in the old bones of documentary earnestness either, and I share your distaste for photographs that rely more on rhetoric than even on the images depicted within them, so I'm still looking for something else – the way that someone like you builds for him or herself a code, the enaction of which functions as a model of possible experience, rather than its mere recording or depiction. What strikes me as counterintuitive about your working process is the way in which you would seek that personalized code, as Leonard Cohen said, "among the garbage and the flowers".

TR: I defend what I called "the pleasure of photography", and I'm trying to make sense of the aspects of my life that have mythic aspirations, rather than, say, the unimpressive dirt under the kitchen sink. I suppose I'm involved with this circular logic where yesterday's cliché becomes today's abject. If you're a white heterosexual male from a wealthy country, no one wants to hear about your personal problems. You're swimming in banality. Maybe this is the reason I'm touched by unhappy fashion models. Our culture laughs at their problems. It's obvious, isn't it?

I identify
with sad,
pretty girls.

Sometimes I try to change allegories into symbols. That's how romantic the project is. I don't believe there are rational answers waiting. There isn't a solid platform to view or criticize the world from, and there isn't one correct way to decode the images.

The Christian church cannot fully realize what it means that its main mystics – people like Meister Eckhart (in Germany) or St John of the Cross (in Spain) – were mainly experimental writers. They were brilliant poets. Ecstatically – by critically expanding and challenging their chosen medium – they met God – they created meaning. Poem after poem, their writing made new experience possible.

GB:

Many of the ideas
you allude to –
states of hysterical
transcendence,
a world
in continual flux
between extremes,
the undoing of
a rational basis for
understanding,

and the elevation, however light-heartedly or perversely, of mythical figures – are, as you said, entirely Romantic. And I think that stance is indicative of at least some segment of our times. I could cite parallel practices in the work of Matthew Barney, Sue de Beer, or Anthony Burdin.



What do you think accounts for this at the moment? Obviously the Romantic impulse never entirely disappears, but only changes its formulation, as it did, for example, in its evolution from Existentialist to Beatnik to Punk. It's been conspicuously absent from visual art though for at least fifty years. Why now?

TR: I remember going alone to the cinema, when I was 13 or 14, to see a Brooke Shields movie called Sahara. It was an exciting film. Afterwards, I discovered that all the critics hated it. I had seen 'a bad film' but was blind to its defects. This fascinated and troubled me. Trying to figure out the criteria for judging art, I would go regularly to the public library in Stavanger, the town where I grew up, and read British music papers – *Melody Maker* and *NME*. I became a student of rock, I grew into its Romantic world view. I suppose a lot of us in various ways were raised on rock'n'roll.

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GB: The filmic reference is a seemingly unavoidable one when addressing mass culture. I see the cues in your pictorial DNA, but am not wholly convinced that the transaction is complete. I don't feel that your own videos, for example, quite mesh with the structure of film, despite how much they owe to the pleasure of film-worship. What is the unifying glue that makes them singular works, as opposed to, for instance, the hidden or diverted ideas that I detect in your book, *White Planet Black Heart*?

TR: Sequencing photographs for books and films are two very different processes, of course. The films were first inspired by cheap *anime*, in which the story is told through few drawings and minimal movement. You've seen artists separate a narrative fragment, which they repeat and study like a loop or a brick. I'm building full cycles: Night falls, followed by morning and day in an endless continuum. A sort of narrative unfolds, but there's no plot and no progression. *The Exorcism of Mother Teresa* was made differently, as it has a linear structure. That was my first film piece, and I wrote a script for it... But my experience doing that ended up strengthening my belief in improvisation, and there hasn't been a script for any of the subsequent four films. The end result has to grow more intuitively, which is similar to the way I build exhibitions. The latest film, *Non-Progress*, is loosely built around a couple of jokes by Mitch Hedberg.

the criteria for
judging art.

After having grouped photographs in white spaces for a while, it was a kick to edit images on a monitor, to let one moving photograph replace another in the same frame. Unity in sound, light, and color help create small sequences. Old school strategies of *Verfremdung*, such as abrupt editing and incoherent structures, have lost their persuasiveness in the artworld. They're expected.

But I did find in the photographic book a medium open to productive jump-cuts. Very different images can challenge and add to each other's potential meaning. The fact that the viewer can choose where and how long to look... well, that makes a big difference. There can be just as many hidden ideas in a film, but the viewer's contribution will be different – she has to wait.

GB: Do you find book publishing – or, at the very least, the publication of still photographs in whatever media, as for instance, in a magazine – more of an interactive engagement than video and film? I'm asking about that participation of the reader that you mentioned, and comparing it to the inevitable passivity of the moviegoer.

I also bring it up in connection to our earlier thought – that photographs might serve by virtue of their ambiguity as a model of experience open to elaboration, one that begins with the photographer but enjoys ongoing activation by an engaged viewer. I contrast this with the short-term bonanza and subsequent paralysis of the filmic experience.

TR: A lot of my photographs deal with paralysis and passivity as well. Silently hanging around – just looking – is a big part of my life. I'm not your typical downhill skier; I don't need that type of intensity. I don't know how to take it in, it makes me go numb.

It's true that moving images enforce a period of paralysis in ways that photographs don't. Monumental video installations can trap you in a thoughtless moment more effectively than even the huge expressionist paintings of the 80s. Fearing this, I started out with monitors instead of big, black projection spaces. Now I know that my films make viewers reflect. They are not that overpowering or self-obsessed, with the possible exception of *132 BPM*. I'm also discovering that they help people figure out how to look at the photographs.





GB: How so? This seems to take for granted the notion that video is merely a chain of still images, but with *132 BPM* in particular, a clearly different operation is occurring, one more plainly dependent on tempo.

TR: Right, but that different operation, with its strong preferences for sound and tempo, creates a more accessible universe than a collection of photographs.

**I think
contemporary viewers
are more
conditioned to follow
the choices
behind a movie
than those
behind a photograph.**

My pictures aim to manipulate observed reality in subtle ways. They look more like the images you're used to seeing in calendars and magazines than my films look like anything on TV.

GB: Which returns me to the immediate perception I felt when I first saw

your photographs — a feeling of consciousness suspended,

of a gentle but purposeful undoing of the rational underpinnings of all that photographic facticity and context. It's what I think of as the retarded aspect of your work. I mean this humorously and not, which is, I believe, exactly as the work intends. There is a toying, a sort of dance along the playful/yearning/terrifying/ridiculous axis, one that acknowledges the abyss present in any act of careful consideration, but yields neither to despair nor hope. It's not as obvious as telling a joke on the firing line, but maybe more like imitating a penguin in the same situation. There's absolutely no sense to it, but the tragicomic absurdity, the perverse anti-rationality of it, attains a level of pathos that is, indirectly, that much more knowable as genuine experience.

TR: Or it can prepare for genuine experience of a different kind, like the mystic poets did. We talked about the need to break with the ongoing documentary tradition in photography. That tradition has strong links to a deep humanism and a no-nonsense rejection of alternative realities. I don't believe humanity is a uniquely privileged species that will solve all problems and rule the planet, and I'm more enthusiastic for another photographic tradition, one that advocates reality expansion. I'm thinking about UFO and spirit photography, cryptozoology, ectoplasm, that kind of thing. Of course it's no use if you're just toying around with it. Everything worthwhile lends itself easily to parody. What I do is fight the joke, and to fight it, I have to know what it tastes like. Ultimately, I try to show you something you haven't seen in an image you're convinced you have.

TØRBJØRN RØDLAND was born in 1970, in Stavanger, Norway. Lives and works in Oslo. His works have been shown among the others at P.S.1, New York and at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago...

GIL BLANK is an artist, writer and editor at *Influence* magazine. He lives and works between Los Angeles and New York.

