

Sophia Greiff

Author and Curator for Photography

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## FOTODOKS 2013

### STRANGER WORLD

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### LIFE AS IT SOMETIMES IS

“Being lonely is not the same as being alone. The loneliness we experience when surrounded by people is the loneliness we try our hardest to hide. We all have aspects to ourselves that we try not to display. Aspects, which are personal and vulnerable.”

(Margaret M. de Lange)

Vulnerability and weakness, insecurities and hidden longings, the fragile and dark side of human existence. These are the themes that photographer Margaret M. de Lange is searching for in her haunting, high-contrast black and white photographs. She takes photos of family members, friends and casual acquaintances and intuitively captures moments and situations in which an emotional barrier opens up: The portrayed share aspects of their inner life, while the photographer discovers hidden sides of her self. On the fine line between intimacy and openness, de Lange shows her private self in images of the other. She uses the camera as a means of self-reflection and understanding, her counterpart as a mirror of her own feelings, her own loneliness, her own fears and dreams. The immediacy and intimacy of the resulting images trigger a sense of anxiety and disturbance; they are not afraid of blunt physicality.

Naked, vulnerable, honest. According to de Lange these are the adjectives that characterize a credible photographic approach. And this is certainly right, since engaging personally, exposing and making oneself vulnerable not only adds authenticity to the documented, but also underlines the photographer's integrity. How intense a narrative can be when someone takes the risk to open up privately can be seen in Linn Schröder's haunting "Self Portrait with Twins and One Breast." Dressed in a second skin of tights she is sitting on a bedcover; her twins, just a few weeks old, are lying loosely, yet safe in her arms. A man's hand slides from the left edge of the image into the mouth of one child and seems to substitute the missing breast, which is replaced by an

amputation scar on the photographer's torso. It is an image of a personal borderline experience in which extreme situations of life and death culminate forcefully: the scar of survived cancer that will remain forever and remind of the struggle with illness and threatening death on the one side, the new life on the other. Twice.

But despite the intensity with which a very intimate story is being shared, this is not about "poor Linn Schröder" and her fate. By not showing her face and by obviously staging the portrait, the photographer creates a distance to her own character. Her posture evokes effigies of the Virgin Mary and through these art-historical references seems to transfer the image into a different time. The body turns into a symbol that refers to the absurdity and contradictions of existence and irritates in its fragile iconography. This irritation could also be seen in the context of the exhibition "Beyond Borders" by photo agency Ostkreuz, for which the image was made: amidst various great documentary series the viewer is suddenly confronted with a single photograph. An image that brings everything to the point. A statement with three exclamation marks.

In their visual immediacy the works of both Margaret M. de Lange and Linn Schröder confront the viewer with himself and his reaction to what he has seen. For when we are face to face with illness and death, the other and unfamiliar, issues that are generally pushed aside, we lack the concepts for an "appropriate" classification and evaluation. How are we supposed to react? Shall we be concerned or ashamed? Or are we allowed to simply recognize that the visible and invisible scars are a part of all of us and that people have to deal with them – and are able to do so?

How life can go on after the unthinkable has also been examined by the Norwegian photographer Andrea Gjestvang. On July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011 a car bomb detonates in Oslo's government district and kills eight people. Nearly two hours later an armed man dressed in a police uniform sets foot on the island of Utøya and starts shooting. Around 560 teenagers attending a summer camp by the social-democratic labour party „Arbeidernes Ungdomsfylking“ (AUF) are on the island at that time. 69 people, most of them only 17 or 18 years old, are being executed. Over a hundred people are injured, half of them seriously. All of them had to experience fear of death, lost friends and siblings, carried away physical and emotional scars. "As a Norwegian and a photographer, who had already worked on a project about young people in Finnmark, the northernmost region of Norway, it was impossible for me to not deal with this event," says Gjestvang. She wanted to know what happens when the innocent life of a teenager is shaken by such a shock. A year after the massacre, she travelled through all parts of Norway, met 43 of the surviving adolescents and photographed them in their home environment – in places where they now seem a little bit lost, where everything has remained the same while they themselves have changed fundamentally.

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Despite all accounting for the past, Gjestvangs portrait series is also not about her personally but about a part of her, the history of her country, her honest interest in the private lives of the victims, which continues even after the subject has disappeared from public media. All three of the presented works are adopting a subjective approach, which doesn't explicitly examine the subject but refers to a different level. By examining individual motivations, engaging personally with people and stories, and by crossing individual or thematic boundaries, the photographers allow the viewer to emotionally approach the depicted. They share what touches, startles and interests them and show life as it sometimes is – with all its injuries and scars, borderline experiences and twists of fate, but also with the hopes, changes and growth that may arise from it.