

## TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT – Adrienne Lai

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### PUBLIC VIEW: INSIDE>>>OUT

Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One believes himself the others' master, and yet is more a slave than they.

- Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract*.

Bettina Hoffmann's photographs investigate the contingent and arbitrary character of the rules and roles that bring humans together in the bonds of civilized society. Her images resemble dramatizations of everyday scenes that are re-enacted in order to impose a freeze-frame and capture the exact moment at which overall social structures are made visible. Using strategies of play-acting, role reversal, and staging to slightly shift the scene's normal contexts, Hoffmann reveals the cultural conventions to be absurd, as random and manufactured as the rules of a child's game. The negotiation of these rules is portrayed as a tense struggle that takes place on a number of fronts, in spaces that are located internally, externally, and at the intersection of the two.

Theorists such as Rousseau and Freud have noted the difficulties of negotiating between the individual's freedom and the common good of a communal group. In order to participate in a community, individuals must subsume their libidinal impulses. These desires, if pursued boundlessly, could pose a threat to the collective structure of civil society. The individual thus agrees to a trade-off; immediate instinctual gratification is exchanged for the stability and security that interpersonal relationships – be they romantic, familial, friendly, or political – entail. This is not an easy exchange. As Freud observes, "[T]he two urges, the one towards personal happiness and the other towards union with other human beings must struggle with each other in every individual; and so, also, the two processes of individual and of cultural development must stand in hostile opposition to each other and mutually dispute the ground."

A sense of this psychological conflict surfaces in one of Hoffmann's untitled images, where one female figure straddles another in a strange game, riding her like a horse. The blurring of the figures indicates movement and suggests a physical struggle, perhaps involving violence and coercion. However, what initially reads as the play of submission and domination between two subjects changes with the viewer's realization that both figures in this photograph are the same woman. The image's narrative thus shifts inward, from a "real" space to the fantastic, imagined space of the mind, where we seem to witness an internal battle between psychological impulses: the id versus the ego, reason versus emotion, good versus evil.

This embodiment of opposing psychological impulses reoccurs in the series *Maître et chien*, where people pose for the camera with their "dogs" – other humans who assume canine postures. In these pictures, the human actors take on their animal roles curiously well: expressions become vacant or vaguely curious, jaws slacken, and we can easily imagine a whine or a bark escaping from their mouths. One is tempted to read the ease with which this transformation occurs not as good acting, but as a simple reversion to an innate animalistic self. Animals have frequently served as the screens against which human desires and fantasies are projected, embodying an ideal existence free from the demands and constraints of society. Here, the human dogs stand in as ciphers for the individual's libidinal impulses; however, like the pets that represent them, these urges have been tamed. In the images, the human masters embody this domesticating process, as they rein in the "dogs" with a steadying hand on the back or a stern, vigilant gaze. But this sense of freedom and instinct cannot be entirely contained: it underlies each image, strains at the bit. In one photograph, we are distracted by a large expanse of grass that extends off into the background, which we examine with yearning. In another, a lone human-dog has eluded her master's civilizing tether, and jumps up onto some chairs to drink from a forbidden dish at the table. By placing humans in the roles of dogs, Hoffmann invites us to imagine the world through the animals' eyes, where the opportunities to transgress

the rules of civilization seem ever more immediate and tempting.

Elements of role swapping and play-acting resurface in *Sweets*, Hoffmann's recent series of photographs of children. The relationship between childish mimicry and adult behaviour is emphasized, as child's play is depicted as serious and mature activity. This is especially evident in the poses of the girls, whose stances adopt a subtle sexuality. These images are both familiar and wrong: the ill fit of their juxtaposition emerges in the details, where shoes are a bit too big, a slip is worn back to front, and a girl's languorous posture is contradicted by the abjectly puerile gesture of the brownie crammed in her mouth. While we are invited to interpret these images as innocence lost, this is a cultural projection: the equation of childhood with unspoiled innocence is a grown-up conception, nostalgic wishful thinking on the part of adults. In reality, the behaviour of children is not that sweet – they form strategic alliances, they grapple for power, they seek love and recognition, they prey on the weak. Is it that they mimic adults, or is it that children and adults both mimic the same dysfunctional external model? Perhaps the oddness of these images originates in the perversity of mimicry itself, in the desperate attempt to fashion oneself according to some elusive external image. In *Sweets*, the performative (and therefore voluntary) aspect of social roles is highlighted. The children's performances provide a critical reflection for our own behaviour: in the contemplation of their games, we are reminded of our own, and that like them, we can choose to stop playing.

In *La soirée* – construction I, II, III, this refusal or failure to conform to the rules of social relations reveals the fragile and contingent nature of the civilizing bonds that attempt to bind people together. In this series of photographs, individual figures are literally joined together in a fictional social gathering. Digital imaging technology assembles these separately shot individuals in a seamless collage, so they appear to be occupying time and space in simultaneity. Here, people seem to forego the small talk and niceties normally mandatory at social events; no one makes eye contact, no one interacts. Relationships between figures are presumed, and various groupings of people are read as platonic, romantic, or familial. Yet these readings are pure speculation: both the narrative and spatial suturing are provisional. Their seams are revealed, as the figures look as if they are off in interior worlds, alienated from one another, unable to conceal the truth of their isolated origins. In this way, the technical construction of the photograph mirrors the social construction it depicts: despite our efforts to fill our lives with family, friends, lovers, parties, each of us is ultimately alone. The failed cohesion of this band of isolated individuals demonstrates the lonely, existential nature of the human condition.

The underlying project of Bettina Hoffmann's photographic body of work is to make visible our chains, the constructs that constitute our tying together in a network of social connection, obligation, and interdependence. What the photographs truly reveal is the tenuousness of these structures: they are as temporary and instrumental and "dismantleable" as scaffolding. The fragility of this architecture is exposed as individual desires and agendas push at its foundations and threaten to break it down. In her photographs, Hoffmann presents a carefully built snapshot of social life, in which cultural constructions are captured in a moment of tension between gravity and buoyancy. They may endure or they may fall; after this moment, anything is possible.

#### PRIVATE VIEW: OUTSIDE>>>IN

There is something about Bettina Hoffmann's photographic-based works that persistently invites comparison to film stills. Perhaps this is because her images are constructed in such a way as to highlight the frozen quality of the moment, depicting individuals (I am tempted to say "actors") awkwardly suspended mid-gesture or on the verge of speech. These fragments of time seem to be sliced out of an ongoing storyline, implying that a larger human drama is unfolding on either side of the shutter's click. The viewer is invited to elaborate on the significance of this mere moment, to re-situate this snippet within an imagined narrative context constructed according to the vicissitudes of personal histories, tastes, and interpretations.

However, upon closer inspection, numerous elements in Hoffmann's works complicate their assimilation into a cinematic model. Precisely because they are photographic – still, isolated fragments – Hoffmann's images deny the viewer the pleasure of narrative closure, the satisfaction that comes with cathartic resolution. The ambiguity of the

scenarios and their lack of connection to familiar cinematic clichés reinforce this sense of frustrated curiosity. Like the people in Hoffmann's photographs, I am trapped in a suspended state of animation, left to speculate endlessly on the content and meaning of a scene that will never be explained.

Furthermore, unlike traditional cinema, where there is a tacit complicity with a voyeuristic type of looking, Hoffmann's photographs trouble the scopophilic gaze. Normally, the film spectator's position is on the outside, looking in at the "hermetically sealed world that unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy." The power and control associated with my voyeuristic gaze is wrapped up in my ability to acquire knowledge about a scene while remaining unacknowledged and unchallenged by its participants. In Hoffmann's fictions, however, my protective distance is diminished, as the characters resist comprehension via rational narratives, transgress spatial boundaries, and threaten me with their proximity and presence.

In *Affaires in finies*, a voyeuristic gaze is facilitated but ultimately disturbed by the surreal quality of the scenes depicted. In this series, Hoffmann shows groups of women interacting with apparent comfort and intimacy, in ordinary domestic and exterior spaces. I look in on these scenes of familiarity, sometimes catching private moments: two figures in a bedroom, one in a state of semi-undress; another pair in mid-conversation, spied through a thicket of branches. My viewing pleasure, however, is disturbed by the realization that these women are actually the same woman – the artist herself, in fact – doubled, tripled, quadrupled within the space. The rational coherence of the scene is shattered, and I am reminded of the school of thought in dream interpretation where every character in one's dream is said to be an aspect or avatar of oneself. Have I stumbled into someone else's psyche? My difference is exaggerated by the figures' unrelenting sameness. My voyeuristic sense of outsidership is pushed beyond thrill to the point of self-conscious discomfort. The homogeneity and narcissism of the dark-haired clones suggest a completely hermetically sealed world – a literal self-involvement that excludes all others.

This sense of unbelonging persists in *La soirée* – construction I, II, III, a trio of photographs that maps a small social gathering over the passage of an evening. Individuals of varying ages are present here, from one young child to various older adults. They stare off into space, laugh or grimace, nurse glasses of wine. Their relationships to one another are unclear. Is this one extended family unit or a clique of couples, one of which has chosen to bring along their daughter? Why do they not appear to be interacting? What histories, utterances or actions have spawned this apparent resentment? As a viewer, I am set apart from the central action of the scene, not only due to my lack of comprehension, but through spatial means as well. In *La soirée* – construction I, the primary activity revolves around the coffee table, where glasses of wine and bottles of beer accumulate. I occupy the position of outsider, the wallflower of the party, observing from the fringes of the scene. As the evening progresses (and how much time has passed between *La soirée* – construction I and *La soirée* – construction III? Minutes? Hours?), the partygoers move outward from the centre of the frame, toward the edges, which cannot contain them. Abetted by boredom, annoyance, and/or alcohol, the party crumbles into entropic decay. The movement disturbs my quiet, unnoticed place on the sidelines. The figures begin to encroach on my space, culminating in *La soirée* – construction III, where a woman in red pants advances directly toward me. This figure's precise placement blocks my view of the scene, and her out-of-focus state signals the alarming proximity of her approach. She threatens to break through the invisible fourth wall that comfortably separates the fictive world of the photograph from the physical reality of my viewing position.

The spatial boundaries that normally keep the viewer distant from the object of his or her gaze are further questioned in the video installation *La ronde*. As in *La soirée* – construction I, II, III, it is as if I have wandered into some strangers' psychodrama, left to decipher the cause of the social tension. The characters are still frozen in mysterious tableaux, but in this video, the camera moves around the scene in a circle. I am allowed the freedom to roam around the scene's outer circumference, searching for exculpatory clues among the figures and objects located on the inside. The boundaries between inside and outside are simultaneously broken and redrawn. While I am uprooted from my single point of perspective outside the frame and allowed to view the scene from numerous angles, I am not permitted to fully enter the scene – I can only orbit it endlessly. The mild vertigo produced by this continuous revolving motion echoes the existential nausea produced by my continued sense of social and physical

alienation from/within the scene.

In a number of Hoffmann's more recent photographs, the distance between the photographic subject and the perceiving subject has been almost entirely removed. In *Untitled (girls)*, a pair of girls loom menacingly above, and I am placed in a subordinate position, perhaps that of a smaller, picked upon child. The girls jeer and make odd hand gestures, which are indecipherable due to the fact that they are placed right in my face. Here, the objects of my observation return my gaze aggressively, and seem to punish my voyeurism with a bullying confrontation. In another series of untitled images, the viewer's low position is placed in the middle of a small crowd of adults, who react to something off-camera or laugh deliriously at an unheard joke. I am engulfed by figures that stand too close, and I get the sense of being physically dropped into the immediate centre of one of Hoffmann's paused dramas. The camera's point of view engages the viewer's sense of subjectivity bodily, making involvement in these scenes and psychological games mandatory. However, despite the sense of participation brought by my implication in the photographic space, I am no closer to figuring out what is happening in the scene to which I am now a party. I have been made a physical insider, yet I remain a psychological outsider.

Hoffmann's photographs produce an uncanny effect precisely because in them, the objects of the gaze appear to take on an agency of their own. They disturb the sense of control that normally accompanies a comfortable viewing distance. In this way, the sense of tension and power that is depicted within the constructed scenes is reproduced between the fictional characters and the viewer. Whereas I am normally allowed the observer's detached view in trying to figure out the social dynamics of the scene, because I am now placed within the scene, this detective work takes on more urgency. The solution to this puzzle is necessary for me to secure my subject position, so that I am able to prepare an appropriate reaction – when to laugh along, where to move, and how to dodge or disarm the figures that threaten to enter my world or drag me into theirs. In Hoffmann's photographs, the twin forces of physical and psychic unease are exerted, as I am forced to constantly shift in relation to a space that is simultaneously too far and too close for comfort.

#### Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, « Chapitre premier : Sujet de ce premier livre », dans *Du contrat social ou principes du droit politique* [édition de 1762, orthographe modernisée], document électronique, <[http://www.un2sg4.unige.ch/Athena/rousseau/jjr\\_cont.html#L1/1](http://www.un2sg4.unige.ch/Athena/rousseau/jjr_cont.html#L1/1)>.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Malaise dans la civilisation*, document produit en version numérique par Gemma Paquet, collaboratrice bénévole et professeure à la retraite du Cégep de Chicoutimi, dans le cadre de la collection « Les classiques des sciences sociales », <[http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques des sciences sociales/html](http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques%20des%20sciences%20sociales/html)>, p. 66.
3. Dans le présent essai, je ferai des allers et retours entre la première et la troisième personne pour imiter les manières dont l'objectif de Hoffmann se déplace entre les positions extérieure (observateur objectif) et intérieure (participant actif).
4. Bien que les œuvres de Hoffmann soient souvent comparées aux *Untitled Film Stills* de Cindy Sherman, elles sont, en ce sens, très différentes. Les photographies de Sherman citent de façon explicite un langage établi de genres et de personnages types cinématographiques, orientant les spectateurs vers des intrigues et des scénarios familiers. Par leur aspect vague et banal, les images de Hoffmann résistent à toute association avec les tropes culturels de masse bien connus.
5. Laura Mulvey, « Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema », dans *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Brian Wallis (sous la dir.), New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, p. 363. [Notre traduction.]
6. Il s'agit d'une autre façon dont le travail de Hoffmann diffère du modèle filmique traditionnel. En faisant le tour de la scène, la caméra brise la règle des 180 degrés qui a cours au cinéma, convention qui interdit de filmer un sujet de l'autre côté d'un axe imaginaire. Cette convention sert à garantir la consistance du point de vue du spectateur relativement à l'espace illustré.