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## ***The Particularity of Being Human***

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*Art is concerned with the particular  
and it reconciles us to the arbitrary.*

Fairfield Porter<sup>1</sup>

"Werde, der du bist!", (Become, who you are!) wrote Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In these four words he summed up concisely the dichotomy of the modern human condition; identity, the particular in human existence, became a question of being and becoming, constancy and change. The interest many modern and contemporary artists have for the body can be traced back to this dualistic theme. The body is the seat of identity: whenever the question "Who am I?" is asked, people look to the body for the answer. It is also the source of many problems and conflicts: how you see yourself is not necessarily the same as how others see you<sup>2</sup>.

This exhibition is presenting the work of Marlene Dumas (born 1953) in combination with a smaller selection of works by Francis Bacon (1909-1992). Notions of body and identity are central to both these artists' work. The two artists represent different generations, come from different worlds, one is a man, the other a woman. Without denying these differences in background, we want to show in this exhibition the candour, directness and courage with which both of them portray the human being, with all its contradictions, in a confrontational and instinctive way. Despite the pitiless representation of human inadequacy, loneliness and angst, the work of both artists expresses a great compassion for the human tragedy.

From his first important works in the 1940s until his death in 1992, Francis Bacon painted human beings in situations of conflict and violence. His distorted, dissected figures, locked in abstracted environments suffer and cry out in pain. The source of their suffering is not revealed in the picture and it seems as though life itself is the cause. Photographs of friends, art works from the past and images taken from the mass media were important sources of ideas for Bacon. Well-known examples are the paintings based on the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge and the one in which he used a film still of the nurse from Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*. Bacon never worked these photographs straight onto the canvas. "In my case", he said, "the photographs become a sort of compost out of which images emerge from time to time."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fairfield Porter quoted by Marlene Dumas in the exhibition catalogue *Miss Interpreted*, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1992, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> See also the explanation of corporality in E. van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, Reaktion Books, London, 1992, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> J. Russell, *Francis Bacon*, Thames and Hudson, London-New York (1971), 1989, p. 71.

Marlene Dumas' models, like Bacon's, come from a variety of sources. She uses people from her immediate surroundings as well as famous and anonymous figures from the mass media in her paintings and works on paper. She isolates them and places them in another context with the aim of painting what she calls "situations", that is: emotions, experiences and events. Individual, private experiences become translated into a collective, public experience. This experience, it would seem, is usually a conflict, a moral, political or cultural contradiction. The tide of the work plays an important part in this transformation. According to Dumas: "Tides give direction to the way a picture is looked at. Desire is depicted, deficiency is central. The whole becomes more complex"<sup>4</sup>.

Having predominantly made drawings, collages and montage objects for many years, the first important pieces Dumas painted in oil was a group of relatively large portraits made between 1984 and 1986. These were based on photographs and Polaroids the artist had shot of friends and acquaintances, or were pictures collected from magazines. These were transferred to the canvas using an episcopes projector. In the painting *The Banality of Evil* (1984), the artist used a photograph of herself. She painted out the car interior in the background, isolating the head in an abstract space. The title - which was taken from a text by Hannah Arendt about the bureaucracy of the holocaust - takes this innocent portrait of a radiant young woman and locates it within the racial discrimination debate. Dumas' white skin made her an unwilling part of the oppression in her homeland. She felt a sense of responsibility and a need to justify her position both to herself and others.

In other portraits Dumas consciously adopts the distorted characteristics of the Polaroid - the close-up effect, a bulging face and a glowing background. The portraits radiate unease, aggression, fear and disaster, though these are clearly no longer private sensations but general ones. The model is stripped of his/her personal identity almost as if the photograph has deprived the subjects of their souls.

A significant affinity between the work of Dumas and Bacon is that neither of them paints directly from life, but uses existing images as a link in the creative process. In this way they emphatically distinguish themselves from the classical view of painting and in particular of portraiture. The classical portrait is the perfect expression of a typically bourgeois Western belief that art is a reflection of an objective, accessible exterior reality combined with the idea of uniqueness - uniqueness in the form of an original interpretation of reality, but also the representation of a single, specific individual. In other words, the portrait genre is based upon the notion of representation on one hand, and the belief in the unique individual on the other.

In two recent articles, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Ernst van Alphen describe how this view of the portrait has been under pressure, and largely dismantled, over the last hundred years<sup>5</sup>. The reasons for this are too numerous and varied to go into extensively. Suffice it to say that the influence of cubism meant that the language of visual signs no longer unequivocally and mimetically referred to the subject being represented. The number of forms on a canvas became severely reduced, and it is via the relationship between these forms that a sign is created. The photography of people like August Sander was important for its serial cataloguing of professions in modern society. This under-

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<sup>4</sup> M. Dumas quoted by P. Andriessse in the exhibition catalogue *The Eyes of the Night Creatures*, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> B. H. D. Buchloh, *Residual Resemblance. Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture*, in M.E. Feldman (ed.) *Face-Off. The Portrait in Recent Art*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Philadelphia, 1994, pp. 53-69. E. van Alphen, *The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Twentieth-Century Portraiture*, in J. Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture, The Visual Construction of Identity*, Manchester University Press, 1995. Buchloh emphasizes the relationship between the portrait and bourgeois subjectivity, while van Alphen argues the relationship between bourgeois subjectivity and mimetic representation as a condition of it.

mined the classical idea of the individual. The individual acquires meaning through their position within a certain structure.

This belief also lies at the heart of Roland Barthes' *La Chambre Claire* (1980). Here Barthes deals with the relationship between the portrait and the portrayed. He states that the subject never has a complete perception of his/her own body, only a fragmented one. Only an image is in a position to represent the body as a whole but - and this is crucial - the result of this is mortifying. The subject is dependent upon the image for a feeling of wholeness, but through representation the subject becomes objectified and the result is loss of self. The subject can only be translated into the terms of the *doxa*, the already-named, the stereotype. The outcome is that the portrait is no longer a depiction of the unique, but of the already-known. This leads to alienation from the self.

The result of this development is that a painted portrait is no longer deemed capable of capturing the essential qualities, the singular peculiarities of a person. In other words, the unity between the inner essence of the subject and the external image depicted in the painting is broken and the representation of external reality has become problematic and artificial: the portrait becomes a construction.

The work of Francis Bacon can be seen as a response to all this. In David Sylvester's fatuous interviews made with Bacon between 1962 and 1986, Bacon on several occasions emphasized the importance of distortion in order "to make the image more immediately real to myself."<sup>6</sup> Without this distortion the work would fall into illustration which, in his outspoken opinion, was the opposite of vision. Bacon's desire to make the image of the subject more real should be understood as an attempt to avoid the stereotype or artificiality of representation and to bring the model back which, as Barthes said, has left the painting. Bacon explains: "What I want is to distort the thing far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance."<sup>7</sup> The struggle between the subject and its representation is the real subject of Bacon's portraits.

The work *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne* (1967) concisely illustrates Bacon's view. As van Alphen observed, "this painting is not only a portrait, but also a work about the portrait."<sup>8</sup> Isabel Rawsthorne, a friend of Bacon's, is pictured three times in the painting: in a space in front of a door which she is opening or closing, in a space behind this door, and in a painting which is clearly fixed with a nail, hanging beside the door. Within the painting the ambiguous distinction between reality (in front of and behind the door) and representation (the portrait beside the door) is thematized. The door, which can also be seen as an unpainted canvas or a monochrome painting, introduces an ambiguous division between inside and outside within the space of the painting. A certain tension is created by the double presence of Rawsthorne's figure, a tension which is related to the idea of representation, and that becomes more intense by being combined with the portrait nailed on the wall.

The three portraits in this painting have been painted in a heavy, almost violent impasto characteristic of Bacon's work. The most tormented face is the one in the portrait next to the door which symbolizes the destructive effect of mimetic representation. The painting extends partially over the edge as if it is coming out of or being sucked into the picture. The face is distorted, fragmented and intensely animated. A distance grows up between the figure and its representation: the paint is torn between its referential function and its own materiality. The sober, thinly-painted backgrounds, by contrast, barely demand any attention. The abstract art to which they refer is merely decoration.

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<sup>6</sup> D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact. Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames and Hudson, London - New York (1975), 1993, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> See also *op. cit.* (note 2).

Bacon's aim is "to hit the nervous system" and "to return the onlooker to life more violently". In his monograph on Bacon, Ernst van Alphen demonstrates how this aim has two aspects: it is both the theme of Bacon's representations and the effect on the viewer<sup>9</sup>. In his paintings figures appear "as the nervous systems laid bare and struck. But it is also what happens through the paintings. Bacon's paintings also make viewing a painful experience; they render viewers speechless."<sup>10</sup> There is a sense of a loss of self, the total deconstruction of identity. The struggle for representation is finally lost by the subject.

Marlene Dumas' work just as clearly has its origins in the problem of the representation of the human figure. She is conscious of the fact that representation can no longer be direct but takes place via "the already-named", the stereotypes and simulacra of the mass media which stand in the way of a direct view of a naked reality. However, Dumas fights against this, her aim being "to portray people in all their complexity and never definable identity."<sup>11</sup> In her research into the conventions of traditional portrait painting one of the means she uses is distortion - especially of colour and proportion - to challenge these conventions. However, mimetic representation is never attacked head-on as in Bacon's work. The existential theme Bacon attaches to this is no more direct in Dumas' work, but she approaches it in a roundabout way.

In *Pregnant Image* (1988-1990) for example, a highly pregnant woman ostentatiously displays her swollen belly, breasts and labia. This figure is constructed from different source material: the pregnant belly is the artist's own, the face is based on a photograph of a friend and the legs, in Dumas' words, "came out of the paint itself". The difference between the blue colour and the rudimentary lines of the face compared to the rest of the body almost gives the impression that the woman is wearing a mask. This creates an unexpected contrast between the belly symbolizing life and the mask-like face evoking emptiness and death. This can no longer be seen as a conventional portrait depicting a graceful representation of a naked woman. The person is constructed from different sources and unites in itself various identities. The face is largely stripped of its subjectivity and the image is shifted from a personal to a general level; partly through the title (*Pregnant Image*) the piece becomes a far from unambiguous statement about the status of the image or of painting.

This picture gives a good indication of the freedom with which Dumas sets about painting. As she says herself: "Because I also use Surrealist (and other) methods, such as chance and sudden ideas beyond my control, it is never a case of: here is my intention and I translate that into an image and there is only one correct interpretation. The image is a combination of sudden flashes. I can describe various areas of meaning, but the final content comes about after the work is completed and not before, often at the expense of my first idea. The point is the impossibility of certainty, not defining a concept."<sup>12</sup>

In *The Particularity of Nakedness* (1987), another important work by Dumas, the artist tackles traditional ideas of masculinity. Dumas challenges machismo by placing the figure in a horizontal position. The naked man - usually portrayed standing heroically erect in traditional nudes - is here presented unidealized in all his vulnerability. His attitude is passive; his gaze is penetrating but does not simply turn the viewer into a voyeur. The model, the artist's boyfriend, is not displayed here, but is revealed as an erotic subject through the explicitly sensual depiction of his skin and body. It is an

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

intimate painting which gives the viewer the impression of being an intruder - out of place and ill at ease.

The question of how to pierce the stereotype in order to generate meaning runs through all Dumas' work. It is the explicit subject in much of her work - particularly in the works on paper which are much more direct in character. A good example is *Waiting (for Meaning)* from 1988. Lying on what could either be a table or a coffin, a naked woman is stretched out on her back, her legs hanging a little open and slightly turned towards the viewer. What is going on here is unclear, but, as in much of Dumas' work, a tense atmosphere - as if something has just happened or is about to happen - hangs over the painting. Is this fragile apparition waiting for her lover - that which gives her meaning?

The semantic openness typical of Dumas' work is here associated with corporality, desire and eroticism. Meaning remains a future event, never a fulfilment. It only occurs relation to the contemplator, who approaches the image from the outside. The meaning changes according to the spectator and the context. Dumas also manages to how this in the materiality of her work. She paints openly, movingly and hardly formalized. The way in which the paint is applied betrays a bodily action and an emotional and sensual involvement. The paint suggests representation without entirely merging with it. Paint here is ambiguous and leads its own life, but, in contrast with Bacon's paint, it does not question its representational function in a direct way.

The meaning generated by Dumas' work is always ambiguous, and is always related to the dismantling of traditional painting conventions, which in turn embody historically and socially determined views of identity, life, death, love, good, evil, and so on. Of course, this also applies to the work of Francis Bacon. The difference lies in the means they use for this purpose and the way they apply them. Bacon was exclusively concerned with painting. Through often stark contrasts in texture, relief and colour he demanded attention for the materiality of the work. Painting, and perception as a condition for painting, are thematized in his work through constantly returning to elements such as circles, arrows, mirrors, lights and shadows<sup>13</sup>. Coincidence, which plays a part at various moments in the making of a painting, is symbolized by arbitrarily thrown paint. Dumas tends to be more inconsistent in her attitude towards painting: while in one work it might be the application of a structure, the chosen format, or her use of colour as is predominant, in another it might be painting as the means for conveying a message. Coincidence, important as it is to her, is not thematized in her work, but is rather a part of the painting process and is consequently invisible. Her texts, whether titles, part of the work, separate statements or articles, are very important. They are an essential element in her conceptual strategy for creating meaning and unmasking the appearance of things.

This exhibition is intended not as a competition, but as a confrontation between the work of two artists. Both of them display a desire to retain a link with reality by using referential or figurative way of working, while at the same time dismantling the belief at traditional mimetic portraiture is a true record of the unique character of the object. The "coupling" of Francis Bacon - who has now become a legendary figure in twentieth-century art-with a comparatively young artist like Marlene Dumas, clearly breaks with certain exhibition conventions. But the intention is neither competitive or polemic: all that we hope is that the exhibition will stimulate an interesting and open discussion. It is in meeting with the other that the image of the "I" is born. And the examination and modification of that image should be a continuous process.

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<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. (note 2), p. 59.