

***Colleagues* - an exhibition companion**

I can only recall ever seeing one photograph of a male artist in bed before. It was of an elderly, fully dressed Henri Matisse, who unable to stand for extended periods of time continued sketching and directing studio assistants from a bed placed in his home and atelier.

Days before Viktoria invites me to write a text in response to *Colleagues*, I attend a talk with author Chris Kraus, artist Constance Tenvik, and gender studies professor Wenche Mülheisen in Oslo, Norway. The conversation begins on the topic of footnotes, or rather 'footnoting' — as an active gesture rather than a passive formality. They speak about the action's implicit generosity, its deferral of a sense of historical authority or monolithic narrative, and the importance of table-setting for conversations beyond one's own work, between a contemporary reader and a citation from years, decades, even centuries prior. The gesture of introducing two friends you are sure will get along and daring to leave the room yourself. In *Colleagues*, we are not met with *literal* footnotes, but the work facilitates a similar form of conversation. It resonates from the works firm situation in the contemporary — its art-makers, its discourses, its relationships to materiality and conceptual practices — yet its careful composition and framing allude to motifs and visual 'footnotes' which resonate with both art and social histories.

Viktoria Wendel Skousen's new photographic work *Colleagues* emanates from a realm of personal and professional relations that have allowed the work to be imagined, conceived of and produced. Simultaneously, it situates discreet entry points to these relationships by way of intelligent and intelligible citation. Familiar concepts and references concerning representations of the human form — gender, eroticism, sexuality, virility, fetishisation — are positioned here to address and allude to the roles and dynamics which have determined, art-historically, the value and critical engagement granted to the work of female and male artists.

Wendel Skousen poses the same hypothesis to herself, her male peers, and ultimately to us, its viewers. The images concretise the important question of how we imagine, perceive and discuss the work and working relationships of male and female artists. In its most intimate and literal sense, the work is about trust, and in a wider optic about how we, its viewers, regard the relationships which have inspired and facilitated them.

In *Colleagues*, objects of social and professional signification are stripped from the body and its mise-en-scène, leaving the perspective and gaze of both subject and photographer at the centre of a relational choreography. In it, two artists partake with a shared understanding of the situation, not only of the work as it is produced in situ, but also its conceptual heritage, public dissemination, and the lens(es) of interpretation it will be read through. The art-historical motifs it cites are in themselves neither feminist or not feminist, they are part of a vast, persistent choreography that emanates from a 'universal' art-historical canon which few of us can completely break out of orbit from. Even when we resist it, the sequence of the personal, the professional and the political is omnipresent in our most intimate relations, in our bedrooms, places of work, ateliers and studios.

Rather than turn her back to this history, Wendel Skousen knowingly engages it by submitting familiar poses and compositions into play, harnessing an energy which could otherwise threaten to commandeer it. In the series of portraits (all named, not granting the depicted artists anonymity), we can recognise, amongst others, the martyred figure of Saint Sebastian, an eroticised male figure popularised by painters from Titian to Rubens, Singer Sargent to Caravaggio. In another, the contours of Olympia — first presented to an offended public by French painter Édouard Manet in 1895. In her time, by simply returning the viewers' gaze, Olympia forced her bourgeoisie audience into an interrogation of the desire and voyeurism which artworks such as her facilitated for them in a 'decent' societal and cultural setting. Wendel Skousen doesn't hit far off a similar mark in our time. In Wendel Skousen's work, a contemporary 'Olympian' gaze challenges us to assess how we look at and construe a heterosexual female artist using her male colleagues as the subject matter of her art. How we regard a male

artists' consented depiction in the semi-nude, in their beds, bedrooms, and studios, stripped of the social signifiers which would otherwise imply their professional proficiency, social repute, or other perceived virtues.

The work's departure from established ways of looking is further reflected in its notable distinction from a now widely acknowledged alternative art-historical canon, in which men — either explicitly gay, or on a spectrum of homosexuality — depict other men in the nude or semi-nude, often under the guise of 'academic' anatomical studies and painting genres, hardly masking their gaze of reverence and desire. This is a point at which Viktoria's and my own perspectives inevitably, yet sympathetically, differ. Skousen being a white, cisgender heterosexual woman; myself, a white, cisgender homosexual man. In our correspondence we quickly identify that there seem to be two strands of art and social histories which have in both antagonistic and complementary ways conditioned how we see ourselves in relation to the wider world, as well as in our most intimate relationships; some histories which are universal and '*relatable*', and the other deeply personal and *relational*, more than often a tool to confront internal and external antagonism. The universal is the almost inescapable Western academic art-historical canon; of sculpted marble bodies, stripped of their signifying make-up and dress and revered for their complete disregard for and lack of originality, their prioritisation of repetition and practice. As originals and copies, they have travelled the world and the project of challenging their dominance in the art-historical canon only sincerely began a slight century ago, after thousands of years of their global dissemination. The others are the alternative artistic and social lineages, beautifully described by American artist Tom Burr through the proxy of artist Lisa Tan, 'of artists looking at other artists', which she denotes as a coincidental yet deeply consequential genealogy.¹ Created by those who have had to invent modes of representation for themselves and others, be it because of gender, sexuality, race, disability, faith, economic disenfranchisement — often at the intersections of them all — artists such as Nan Goldin and David Wojnarowicz as well as authors such as Kraus are some of the most recognisable arbiters of the existence of these 'hookers and tricks, hooked and tricked'². Naturally, through the increasingly social practices and articulations of artistic making in the late 20th and early 21st century, these representations and works of art surrounding 'otherness' now regularly appear 'overground', overlapping and intersecting, and — much like Olympia — confronting increasingly consumerist (#)art audiences to acknowledge the anything-but-profitable conditions of their alternate existence.

Colleagues triggers related assumptions about professionalism and relationships in the present. What has the female artist done to gain the trust and access to portray the depicted men in the privacy of their bedrooms? Surely, they must be taken after or with the expectation of a sexual encounter?

We are so conditioned to make assumptions and project onto the narratives of women's gains and successes in the art world that we find ourselves startled when encountering art in which the transaction of sex and desire is not even peripheral. Or certainly, the work is some form of veiled critique or feminist manifesto? — A female artist's desire to create must emit from a position of being 'against' because it can not possibly be from the same source of creativity and authorship we attribute innately to a male artist? Here it is important to note that this is not a binary or discriminately gendered perspective, the mythologisation of the art world's transactional nature and its relationship to sex has in equal part been the subject matter of artists like Tracey Emin and Sophie Calle.

Since the popularisation of the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' in the 1960s, work in which artists have committed their intimate collegial, romantic or platonic relationships to film are almost automatically read through this effective portmanteau. However, the slogan — an attempt at consolidation — is often utilised as a demand of a *personal* work of art that it subscribe to a *political* position based on an already presumed social constitution, a schismatic attitude that transposed into criteria of a work's *professionalism* is detrimental.

¹ Lisa Tan, 'Other Artists', 2019

² Philip Hoare, 'Introduction', in David Wojnarowicz, *The Waterfront Journals* (2006, Peninsula Press, London, originally published 1996)

Colleagues comfortably outmanoeuvres assumed positions — which have been especially applied to the reading of work by female artists — by neither dismissing nor committing to these existing artistic and social histories. Rather, it clearly stakes out its disinterest in nostalgia and investment in the contemporary. Looking at *Colleagues*, it becomes apparent how it situates itself in relation to a necessary, extensive process of self-editing, instigated by the collective realisation that an established ‘critical’ language has both inattentively and intentionally been used to envelop and isolate work with such intrinsically feminist bearings.

With *Colleagues*, Wendel Skousen asks us not to negate her professionalism, labour, practice, and authorship from the equation. She situates this ask somehow both subtly and in the very centre of the work. In our correspondence, Wendel Skousen states plainly; “To be a male artist should be just as much defined by one’s respect for the profession of female artists, submitting to their gaze, and modelling for their work.” Not to be mistaken for a simple recalculation of gender binaries or power dynamics, she elaborates on her attitude that once you decide to depict it in a work of art, even the body becomes first and foremost a material. It is an interesting, and important idea to bear in mind when looking at *Colleagues*, in which the situation of intimacy can so easily distract us from engaging with the artistic thought and labour which offers pause and reason to engage with it. As viewers, and voyeurs, we far too often void the correlation between the portrayal of human subject matter and the shared artistic motivations with other genres, from landscape painting to sculpture to ready-mades — the portrayal of light, translation of color, literal and symbolic perception, rhythm — because we as humans seem wired to prioritise the analysis of our social relationships to each other.

As part of a wider artistic practice, *Colleagues* grapples with what it would look like to *act* feministically as opposed to *talking* feministically. It addresses a dynamic which has been articulated and *spoken about* in art-historical and other cultural spheres for decades, but rather than *speaking about*, Wendel Skousen demonstrates what she wishes to *do* with this reciprocal respect, trust, and a mutual interest in her artistic practice.

As the invited third party, the work in effect asks us to *act* rather than *speak* our own positions and awareness through the central question of what it means to us to look at artists, in this case, male artists, when they become the subject matter, rather than the author of a work of art. *Colleagues* triggers a necessary doubt within its viewers about the assumptions a majority of us hold, due to art-historical and social canons concerning the situation the work depicts. The ambivalence between the gaze with which we regard art, almost consistently at a tension between the irreverence we reserve for our inter-human desires and the reverence we reserve for artists in particular. Through Wendel Skousen’s lens, the male artists depicted are neither eroticised or de-eroticised, neither artist’s position is favourably accentuated or negated. There is a harmony, rather than tension, between the submission and professionalism they depict, where two colleagues — two artists — have agreed to execute a work in which one is made the subject of many gazes, first Wendel Skousen’s, then ours. They both ask that we, as the third invited gaze, reciprocate their professionalism, as we are all a part of the social choreography that *Colleagues* emanates from, and merit the knowing, ‘Olympian’ gaze it returns.

— Håkon Traaseth Lillegraven



Guido Reni, *Saint Sebastian series*, 1625, detail.

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