



What does it mean to be visible? Dissident physiognomy and portraits in Elly Strik

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1. Close criticism. The edge of history. The Strik opportunity.

I would have liked to write about Elly Strik as if it were to enter directly into another language: a moment of peace in the middle of a never-ending war. But inevitably, once again, this writing exercise will be a battle waged from within the crowded palimpsest of criticism.

I have been fighting with the hegemonic historiography of art for a long time: with its discursive and visual apparatus for the production of truth; with its active segregations of the masculine and the feminine, the heterosexual and the homosexual, the healthy and the sick, the able and the disable, the human and the animal. I have fought this historiography through tireless theoretical interventions and performative assaults: reuniting the voices and bodies of Ocaña and Nazario, the Yeguas del Apocalipsis, Adrian Piper, Trinh T. Minh-ha, the Womanhouse Project, those of Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, Itziar Okariz and Jo Spence, those of Jürgen Klauke and Gironcoli, ACT UP and General Ideas, Guillermo Gómez Peña y la Pocha Nostra and the now faltering voice of Pedro Lemebel... But the dominant historiography, its taxonomies and its rituals return every time the museum opens or the writing begins.

But dominant epistemology always has more troops, more weapons, it manages to hit harder, do more damage than the subaltern. This damage is sometimes felt as an imposed feeling of remorse for not fitting into the institutional canon. Other times it arrives as a sudden blow to the head which paralyzes and forces immediate renunciation. And when the hegemonic language doesn't return in this form, it seeps in sliding, seducing with its library of the easily quotable: a critical apparatus *ready to eat*. I tell myself one more time: I'm going to put up all the resistance that I possibly can.

And Elly Strik affords me the opportunity to try it anew; a magician who invites me to climb on to her 300 X 200 cm paper flying carpets.

In the end it comes down to this: I don't want to write about Elly Strik from outside— as if her work was over there (in the studio, in the gallery, in the museum) and my words are over here (in the catalogue, in criticism, in history). I want to get mixed up in the work. To be close. I want my words to sprout from the pencil strokes of her drawings. To braid these sentences into the hair-fiction tangles that compose the paintings. I want this work and I to begin a mutual and transitory eroticism. Disconcerting. I want to lose my head over the work. Or give my head over to it. Put the work (and all the hundreds of faces and heads that Strik makes visible) precisely in the place where my head is supposed to be. Enact the experience of sensory democracy with the work. Again, I insist: I want to distance myself from a certain kind of criticism, a certain way of making history.

What I want is a kind of overflowing criticism: an exercise through which the history of art could be conceived of as a labour undifferentiated from artistic practice. Not as repetition nor as farce. Elly Strik: "When you read this, my

dearest, I will be near you". Without irony. And at the height of our times, which Kathy Acker calls the "postcynical".<sup>1</sup> Stay close.

For we are not currently occupying just any space. We are situated right at the edge of history itself. I'm referring to the space in which the minority body, the popular, the ill, the disabled...are made visible by the history of art. I am talking about all the practices of social transformation and reinvention of the realm of the sensible that crowd around the door of the museum but rarely or never manage to get in. Whenever I try and fix them in my mind they just sparkle as fragments of languages: it is the work of the multitude, splintered and destroyed but far from dead. It's as if the whole institution of history, the entire history of art, is suffering from attention deficit disorder. It is here that Elly Strik enters with her paintings and performs therapy to collective visual history.

2. Doing therapy to visual history. Multi-verse time as a tangle of yarn. The portrait as somato-political counter-fiction. Temporal and cronopolitical transvestism.

To intervene in the visual history of humanisation is above all to undo and to remake its faces. Since 1980 Elly Strik has been making portraits, often with lacquer and oil but also in carbon or coloured pencils on large format paper— 3 meters in height and 2 meters wide. Close-ups of a face drawn on a large sheet of paper attached to a wall with simple pins: the portraits are of monumental intimacy; of an incommensurable fragility. In the beginning, the object of many of these works is her partner. From 1990 onwards, the self-portrait becomes a form of experimentation and investigation.

Strik's drawings intervene into a history of art whose temporality is governed by ghosts, as Georges Didi-Huberman would say of the work of Aby Warburg.<sup>2</sup> Strik makes explicit the phantasmal function of art: paper and colour are the material site in which the invisible, the impossible, transmutes into the visible. They are a passage onto the sensible through which the veiled faces of history make their appearance. Strik transforms herself into a severer of heads, an archaeologist of evolution seeking the skulls of extinct species, a collector of masks, an alchemist of the sensible in search of invisible faces. It is in this way that Strik reunites a beguiling bank of heads and faces, of materials and organs that have been waiting for centuries to gain another life through the image. With this spectral exercise, Strik reconnects with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century North Sea expressionist tradition, to which she is in proximity (although based in Brussels, Strik was born in the Hague). The profile of bodies blurred by light, the gaze of a face emptied by darkness and all the ghostly reflections recall the portraits of León Spilliaert; the masks which look, the bare flesh presented as a substitute for skin and the skull as the underlying and universal form of the face bring us back to James Ensor.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Acker, *Bodies of Work: Essays*, London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997, p.11

<sup>2</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps de fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris : Minuit, 2002.

Strik's work is a somato-political archive containing history's severed heads: skulls of children, faces of widows and brides, heads of Saint John the Baptist, of Samson and Holofernes, the masks of a gorilla, Ophelia and the Elephant Man, the missing head of Francisco de Goya, busts of the past and future, invisible faces or those that were never seen. This is an archive of the sensible for a liquid museum in which mutation and not identity is the object of registration.

Strik's adoption of the self-portrait is not a move towards greater intimacy but rather a radicalisation of this geo-historic investigation. It is the distinction between portrait and self-portrait itself that is placed in question. To look at history is to imagine a possible face being giving to you. To look at your own face as a form is to reassemble history, to make history anew. Strik ends up severing the head of Strik. The artist is at once Samson and Delilah, Judith and Holofernes, the broom and the bride, the gorilla and the girl. Goya looks at himself in the mirror only to discover his own simian features. The gaze becomes reflexive and at the same time cosmic. It's necessary to loose one's head to really look at history.



Beaucoup de fleurs

In the self-portraits, colour is the vehicle through which phantasmal re-apparition occurs: faces are covered with dense material making the features barely discernable (as in *Hostess*, 2005) or masking it almost entirely (as in

*Beaucoup de fleurs*, 2002-2003). Other times the logic of the spectral operates through a process of vertical interiorisation: Strik peels off the skin to show us the invisible layers of a face; the bones, the muscles, the teeth (as in *Braut*, 1998). However, this dissection doesn't respond to the anatomical gaze of the medical discourse. What Strik offers is an affective counter-anatomy of the face inscribed in matter.



For the viewer, a portrait or a self-portrait by Strik is an enveloping magic mirror baring unforeseen consequences. With the size of the paper, Strik begins to question the traditional scale of the portrait: normally visible at a glance and proportional to the size of the viewer's face. With the 300 x 200 cm format, Strik refuses the portrait's function in the processes of bourgeois subjectification. Excessive, enormous, misshapen, boundless, Strik's portraits devour the bourgeois gaze and interrupt its processes of identification. Furthermore, this extension of the dimensions of the portrait forces the spectator to abandon the privilege of the optical and his or her position as the constituting eye. The spectator's experience is thrown to the thresholds of the tactile. "I would like you to have the impression that the image is touching you" affirms Strik.<sup>3</sup> Affected by moments of deafness during childhood, Elly Strik explores other forms of knowledge and sharpens her peripheral vision and sense of touch. The gaze of the viewer becomes carnal; it intensifies while at the same time becoming vulnerable in its contact with materiality.

But I won't talk here about what Strik does to the spectator, rather what Strik is doing to visual history—for the displacement of the position of the spectator would be just one of the consequences of this epistemological shift. Elly Strik's portraits constitute a series of physiognomic counter-fictions. Strik appropriates the portrait as a technique of the production of subjectivity in order to distort it and create an archive of subaltern apparitions. *Surviving Images*, as Warburg would have said: *des revenants*, we could call them with Derrida: spectres that return: ghosts that the artist helps to traverse over the threshold of the visible. In order to invent alternative portraits and to make the spectral visible, Strik disfigures the norm, deforms the humanising conventions of the gaze, alters the visual resources of the anthropocentric sensitive codes that allow for the discrimination of difference (sexual, animal, racial, somatic and functional...) as well as the production of hierarchies between the healthy and pathological body.

In this way, Strik orchestrates a table of operations for history to lay upon (her own *Atlas Mnemosyne* made of layers of paint and carbon shadows) and the lost faces of a collective visual memory are given a second chance to incarnate. To a conventional photograph of a recently married couple, two elements that resist being absorbed by convention are introduced: the heads of the engaged have been substituted for two phantasmal renderings of the face of Goya. The wife now has the grey and wrinkled face of a pensive Goya while a younger Goya and torso takes over the upper body of the husband. The idyllic representation of heterosexual love, its normative legitimisation through marriage and its codification through nuptial photography is radically displaced by the loving intersection of two masculine faces that correspond to two distinct moments in Goya's life. Time folds back on itself and history unveils its monstrous debt.

I fight to not situate Elly Strik in the line of the conjurers of sexual difference; to not enclose her in the step of the masculine and the feminine. It's not difficult for

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<sup>3</sup> Elly Strik, "On Dark Sugar Loaves and Becoming a Raven. A Conversation with Elly Strik" in *Oracle*, Brussels: Tornado Editions, 2009, p. 78

the mind to be trapped in the catchy chants of the celibate rhetoric of Marcel Duchamp, according to whom “every male artist carries within himself his own wife and every female artist carries within herself her own husband.”<sup>4</sup> For this doesn’t seem to me to be the meandering path of Elly Strik. What the proliferation of portraits shows is not the logic of sex nor the gender binary, but rather a diffused logic closer to the imaginary of Lofti A. Zadeh than to the tactics of transvestism. Strik goes beyond the sexual and gender binary. Duchamp and Darwin, dressed in their Goya masks, tango together in the dance of evolution.

The notion of “temporal drag”<sup>5</sup> or temporal transvestism, articulated by Elizabeth Freeman and Rebecca Schneider in order to understand the processes of re-appropriation that camp and queer culture perform on the “obsolete” objects and subjects of industrial capitalism, seems more appropriate than that of “gender transvestism” for explaining the displacements performed by Strik. The heads of Goya reinserted, provoke not only the evident transgression of gender but also the initiation of an unstoppable process of temporal transgression. The anachronic self portrait is one of the therapeutic methods of Strik’s clinic for visual history, a mode of resistance to modernity’s logic of progress and normative chrono-politics. One more, Didi-Huberman’s reflections on Warburg helps us to understand the work of Strik: “We find ourselves in front of an image as if it were *complex time*, a time provisionally configured, made dynamic by movement. The consequences, or the implications of a methodological broadening of the borders, is none other than the deterritorialisation of the image and of the time that expresses its historicity.”<sup>6</sup>

This “anachronic disruption”<sup>7</sup> that makes the faces of Goya visible on top of a contemporary image, is inverted and intensified when the artist gives over her own face to other phantasmal figures. Strik takes the multiplicity of the threads of time and weaves them around her head as if she were making a braid. Strik’s time is not a Hegelian universal time, nor is it the dislocated time of postmodernism: it is a time that patiently weaves the visible and the invisible, a hair-threaded-through-the-eye-of-the-gaze-time that allows us to repair history. Strik inverts the universe of a single history with a multi-verse of histories that knit together like a tangle of yarn.

The sea shell, the ensemble of the cells of the epidermis, the convolutions of a bow, the wrinkles of a face, the architecture of follicles that form a feather, the speckled transparency of a tissue, the sinuous forms that seem like liquid metal

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<sup>4</sup> Elly Strik, Jean-Christophe Ammann, *Gorillas, Girls and Brides*, Brussels: Tornado Editions, 2005, p.45

<sup>5</sup> Regarding “temporal drag” see Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010; Rebecca Schneider, “Remimesis: Feminism, Theatricality and Acts of Temporary Drag”, a conference as part of ReAct: Feminism, Akademie der Kunste, Berlin, 22<sup>nd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> January 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ibid*, p.39.

<sup>7</sup> Mathias Danbolt, “Disruptive Anachronisms: Feeling Historical with N.O Body”, in Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *Temporal Drag*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011, p. 1982-1990

in flux before solidification, the delicate tulle of braided silk threads, the internal order of a crystal lattice, the undulating vibrations of atoms, the beads of a necklace, the fold of a tie, the complex interweaving of embroidered lace, the sinuous shape of the ear's pinna, the uncountable fibres of hair...all of these reoccurring motifs in the work of Strik are tropes for a temporality of multiplicity. They enter into relation and conflict with embryonic time, evolutionary time, psychic time, accumulative time, time as a function of space and the observer....the time of Darwin, Freud, Einstein...Strik shows us in this way that "the time of the image is not the time of history in general"<sup>8</sup> that time is not linear, that chronology is also a political fiction: time is a living material that is socially and culturally constructed. This is precisely the task of the artist: open temporality and modify the very materiality of history.

The portraits and self-portraits of Strik are interventions in the sensory archive of history. They crease and fold to produce diverse temporalities. Of all the spectres that emerge in the work of Strik, two faces return as insistent and intensified forms: the figure of Ophelia and the mask of the gorilla.

### 3. Ophelia strikes back. Undoing the history of madness. Shakespeare, Delacroix, Diamond and Strik.

With *Ophelia* (a portrait or self-portrait in large format: 231 x 163 cm, made between 2001 and 2008) Elly Strik intervenes in the history of the representation of the face of feminine madness, which can be traced back to the medieval practices of the witch hunts and to modern psychiatry. In Hamlet, Ophelia is the virgin bride who ends up losing her mind when she discovers that Hamlet has killed her father Polonius, later drowning in a river after falling from a willow branch that breaks. As Elaine Showalter has pointed out, the image of Ophelia floating in water—the body inert, the face affected, the absent expression, the hair let down and tangled—became a model of representation of feminine sexuality and its pathologies (melancholy, depression, alienation) in the psychological and psychiatric discourses of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>9</sup>

The portrait of Ophelia dominates modern representations of madness: insanity is a woman and Ophelia is its visible spectre. A critical iconography of Ophelia would show that the image of feminine mental illness was first constructed in the fictional realm of theatre and pictorial representation. Later this regime of representation of madness and femininity would migrate to psychiatric photography and scientific discourses. The theatricalisation of the myth of Ophelia takes on a crystallized cultural form with the actress Harriet Smithson, who played the character in Paris in 1827. Dressed in a black gown with her hair adorned with a heather headdress, Smithson's Ophelia made a strong impact on the French audiences (which included Alexandre Dumas and Hector Berlioz).

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<sup>8</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ibid*, p.39.

<sup>9</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism" in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 77-94. See also: Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind of Doctors*, New York: WW.Norton, 2009.



Smithson gave to Ophelia the intensity of the passions and was able to convey them through the expressions on her face: the gothic and bourgeois Ophelia “drowns in her feelings”.<sup>10</sup> In the decade 1830-1840, Eugene Delacroix, still inspired by Smithson’s hyperbolic interpretation, would represent the death of Ophelia in a series of oil paintings and lithographs. These images served to invent the visual models of the clinic through which feminine madness, hysteria and erotomania were being constructed. Science is smaller than theatre and painting.

Feminine madness as a visual trope emerges as much from the theatrical and psychiatric representation of Ophelia as it does from the tradition of the “physiognomy of the emotions” as Bathelemy Cocles articulated it with his *Physiognomia*. Published at the height of the Renaissance, it appeared at the same time as the invention of the portrait. “Physiognomy” emerged as a technique of visual representation that established correspondences and associations between moral dispositions and the physical features of the face of individuals (animal or human). In *De Humana Physiognomoniam* (1568-1601), Giovan Battista Della Porta establishes a diagram of visual analogies for the diverse features of humans and animals, which allow for the identification of the man-cow, the man-crow, the man-quail. Comparative physiognomy is not only a semiology of the “bestial” nature of the human face, but also a visual hermeneutics that anticipates the logic of Darwin’s science and quantum physics: just as any atom in the world was produced in an explosion of a supernova star millions of years ago, so every hominid facial feature is the result of a process of evolution which includes the entire history of life, bringing us back all to the primordial ripples of hydrogen and helium. Elly Strik will later bring the tradition of physiognomy to its ultimate function: to read the material history of the universe through the face.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Johann Kaspar Lavater secured the scientific status of physiognomy. In his *Physiognomic Fragments* (1775-1778) he provides a detailed study of forms and sizes of the eyes, lips, nose...in order to establish a taxonomy of portraits that would serve as a means of identifying any body. Long before photography and film existed, Lavater invented the “close up” and with it the modern bourgeoisie individual. In modernity, with the process of secularisation and the passage from religious to scientific rhetoric, the “soul” migrates from the immaterial body— a somatization invading matter— to the point at which it reveals itself on the skin and begins to bear a face. It is the individual’s psychology (we should remember that “psyche” means “soul” as well) that can be read through a cartography of somatic signs.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, just as the relations between politics and biology were intensifying so were those between art and social control. Here the portrait emerges as a key technique of governance: the visual classification of the face would begin to form part of the biopolitical and colonial techniques of production and management of difference— between the normal and the pathological. In 1801, with Philippe Pinel’s *Medical-Philosophical Treatise on Mental Alienation or Mania* the portrait comes to be a clinical tool deployed in

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Ibid*, p. 81

order to detect and treat madness. Pinel's ideas were diffused by his disciple Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, who designed a physiognomic atlas of madness that categorised 27 psychiatric-visual types. This would serve to popularise the physical features of "mania", "melancholy", "dementia" and the "idiot". Shortly after, and with the added shrewdness of a social engineer, Cesare Lombroso would transform the technique of the portrait into a police instrument of criminal identification: into the universal archive of madness is now deposited the universalised face of the criminal.

A contemporary of Lombroso, the British psychiatrist Hugh W. Diamond began photographing patients who "suffered from unhinged sexuality." His images followed the codes of representation already articulated by Delacroix (the hair, flowers, the empty gaze, the drowning face) and he would also give the generic name "Ophelia" to one of his first portraits. For Diamond, who created the first laboratory of psychiatric photography in Great Britain in the women's department of mental health at Surrey County Asylum as well as founding the Photographic Society in 1840, Ophelia is not just an insane woman but madness itself made visible. Just one year after Henry Fox Talbot invented the calotype process, Diamond decides to use photography as a method for both diagnosis and therapy in psychiatry.

Two elements seem particularly interesting for a visual-political history of the early psychiatric portraits that made Ophelia a visual trope for feminine madness. In the first place, for Diamond, madness, or what he denominates as the invisible "physiognomic character of affliction"<sup>11</sup>, is made visible through the photographic portrait. Diamond's hypothesis is that a photograph is capable of capturing the different states of the soul. Furthermore— and this would be key in the history of the re-appropriation of the portrait in artistic practice— Diamond states that "patients" could even be cured by observing themselves in the photographs. His theory was that photography could engender a process of revelation and epiphany for his patients. Secondly, Diamond seems to have been fully aware of the power of the portrait not only for its role as a technique of representation but also for its performative effects: the portrait produces the subject it represents. For Diamond, the portrait brings the soul into the domain of the visible and allows him to work with it.<sup>12</sup> This interval between repetition and performative difference, between pathologisation and empowerment, would be the space of visual-political action that the portraits of Elly Strik step into.

Diamond's "Ophelia"— like Frederick Treves' elephant man, Charcot's hysterical women and Akeley's gorilla— form part of a genealogy of bodies that have been made visible according to violent political-visual conventions.<sup>13</sup> In these

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<sup>11</sup> "Physiognomic Characters of Affliction". See Hugh W. Diamond "On the Application of Photography to the Physiognomy of Mental Phenomena", 1865

<sup>12</sup> About the photography of Diamond see Sander L. Gilman. "Hugh Diamond and Psychiatric Photography" in Sander L. Gilman (ed.) *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and The Origin of Psychiatric Photography*, New York: Citadel Press, 1977.

<sup>13</sup> On some of these visual models see Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth Century Paris*, New York, W.W Norton, 2011

physiognomic taxonomies, skin colour and texture, the gaze, the nose, the form of the ears and the quantity and density of skin appear as a political-anatomical index of normality and deviation. The specie, race, sexual difference or sexuality is inscribed on the light or dark skin, on the snub or delicate nose, on the fine or plump lips, on the straight or uncombed hair. Inside of this visual atlas, the animal, indigenous, jew, prostitute, lesbian or criminal are considered as visible species. The bourgeois conventions of the portrait don't just serve the singularisation of the individual soul, but form part of a larger project of surveillance and normalisation. It is into this violent history of visibility that Elly Strik intervenes teaching us to look again, encouraging curiosity to gain ground over habit and allowing the intensity of sensation and sense to overflow frame and form. And for the first time we see it: this vision is not one of identification, but rather of estrangement, not one of recognition of the individual but rather one of cosmic transmutation.

Like Francis Bacon, in order to start a portrait, Strik first extracts the figure from their environment by isolating them: the edges of the paper become the limits of the world. In this way, as Deleuze suggests thinking about Bacon, Strik retracts or even avoids "the *figurative, illustrative and narrative* character that the Figure would necessarily have if it were not isolated. Painting has neither a model to represent nor a history to narrate [...]. Isolation is the simplest mean, necessary though not sufficient, to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick to the fact."<sup>14</sup> In *Ophelia*, the immense portrait threatens to spill out over the limits of the paper, as if the paper were a kind of orifice towards the visible through which the body is striving to transit; a material tunnel between times. "In ideal circumstances", affirms Elly Strik, "the portrait would become a kind of landscape, an expanded plain in which a figure is not immediately recognised. I try to evoke an empty space in which the spectator can be absorbed".<sup>15</sup> Just as the borders of the paper, colours are not only used to isolate the figure, but also to drown it within an environment or an atmosphere initiating the process of becoming-landscape. In *Veronika* (2005), a faceless figure is contained within a blue surrounding that breaks abruptly before it reaches the borders of the paper, creating a barrier between the painting and its outside. In *Spreek, vrouw, wat zal ik je schenken?* (2004), the figure settles against a rose colour: the background is a skin on top of which the form appears and becomes a horizon.

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<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*, Translated by Daniel W. Smith, London: Continuum, 2003, p. 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Elly Strik, *Oracle*, Ibid. p.78



In Delacroix's romantic representations, Ophelia's body appears submerged in water, a transparent layer which both reveals her while pushing her down and away from the visible surface. Elly Strik literally submerges the face of Ophelia in a layer of pink fluid, a mix of lacquer and oil that is almost totally opaque. In contrast to Diamond's Ophelia, where the image promises to unveil and display madness through the precision of photography, in Strik's *Ophelia* the features of the face, its gaze and expression, have been intentionally erased. What emerges then is an Ophelia without a face, which elides the spectator's gaze with a tactile intensity. Ophelia ceases to be seen. In fact: she touches us. It is as if Ophelia, protected by a mask of paint, now refuses to be read through the normative vision. The opacity of the layer of paint that covers the face, cut abruptly at the edge of the canvas, contrasts with the care and precision with which each strand of the hair and the ear has been drawn. The vitality and complexity of the hair (like an electric border of subjectivity and a sign of the irreducible multiplicity of time) empowers the faceless subject and transports them vertically to another dimension that exceeds what the portrait fails to represent.

The same vibrating hair, like a crown of radiation emanating from an invisible star, frames the expressionless face in *When you read this, my dearest, I will be near you* (2001). *Little Bride* (2004) could be another variation of Shakespeare's myth and its psychiatrised successors. Ophelia is also the gothic bride who, in love with the murderer of her father, dresses in mourning at her own wedding. The deviant bride's dress, transformed into a black veil that covers the entire body, rejects as much the normative physiognomy that threatens to pathologize her as it does the romantic rituals which make the bride into a white angelic virgin. Perhaps beneath the veil lies a Goya or a gorilla. The subjectivity of the

bride is never accessible through her face, it is masked and unreadable: "Every bride I paint is invisible," Strik states.<sup>16</sup>

Strik performs a similar subtraction of the face with respect to the normative gaze in *Elephantwoman* (2004). Here the face appears covered by a shifting and porous material, as if the veil or even the skin has calcified. The portrait doesn't look; there are no features. The face has no centre, no balance, no expression. This opacity also denounces the impossibility of subjectification that the normative gaze provokes in the "abnormal", while at the same time the multiplicity of blemishes, marks and orifices in the material are like a multitude of eyes that look and challenge the viewer. The aim of Strik's portrait is no longer the pose or the symmetry of the represented, but rather an exceeding subjective energy, an internal movement behind the unmoved.

In the series *The Bride Fertilised by Herself* (2007-2008) it is no longer about looking at the face, it is about assisting its transformation and revealing a process of mutation and metamorphosis. The work consists in eight pieces arranged horizontally beside each other. Among them are drawings of a head emerging from a whirlwind of pencil strokes and a touching hand. The invisible Ophelias and the self-fertilizing brides of Elly Strik form part of a dissident physiognomic atlas that dislocates the normative visual taxonomies of modernity and establishes new relationships between image, gender, knowledge and subjectivity.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. The alliance of Ophelia and the gorilla. Undoing the human. Gorilizing history.

The second *revenant* that appears insistently in the work of Strik is the Gorilla. During the years 2004 and 2005, Strik made a series of paintings in large format that despite their differences share the same semantic composition: a mask, a face or the head of a gorilla has been placed (inserted, grafted, implanted, hung, superimposed or simply glued?) on top of a human body attired with cultural codes traditionally read as feminine (dresses and tutus).

For a feminist art historian traversing the temporality of ghosts it is evident that the use of the gorilla mask or even the operation that we could call "gorilization" of the feminine (or the feminization of the gorilla) has become a central motif of feminist artistic practices and activism from the Guerrilla Girls to Virginie Despentes.<sup>18</sup> Here I don't mean to point out that Elly Strik is a feminist. It's not about *being* feminist. Feminist is not an essence but a performative attribute. Feminist indicates a mode of doing, a practice, a mode of resisting the norm and precipitating processes of social transformation. I am referring to her *doing* political therapy to visual history. The political reconstruction of the face that

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<sup>16</sup> Elly Strik, *Oracle*, Ibid, p.79

<sup>17</sup> Those who would also belong to this tradition of resisting the portrait as a technology of normalization of subjectivity would be such apparently distinct artists as Goya, Jean Jaques Lequeu, Marcel Duchamp, Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Valie Export, Jana Sterbak, Jeanne Dunning, Rosemarie Trockel, Zoe Leonard, Markus Schinwalk, Orlan, Helen Chadwick...

<sup>18</sup> Virginie Despentes, *Teoría King Kong*, Translated by Stéphanie Benson, New York: The Feminist Press, 2010.

Strik's work proposes could be understood as a central tool for a feminist epistemology and a wider feminist critique. If it's possible to talk about feminism, it is certainly not a female-feminism (related to gender forms of oppression), but rather a gorilla-feminism whose field of action confronts the politics of humanisation.

I ask myself first why the gorilla, or the gorilla mask (in particular King Kong, the pop version), has become such a dominant emblem of feminist activism and contemporary artistic practices. In *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*,<sup>19</sup> Donna Haraway provides an answer that will help us to understand the force of Strik's gesture. Haraway studies the museum as a space of representation in which scientific discourse and artistic practice align in order to construct the human being (in opposition to the primate) as a superior species. The emblematic image of the giant gorilla as the alter ego of the white, civilised man (which takes us all the way to the King Kong cinematography of Carl Denham of 1933) emerges, as Haraway reminds us, from the colonial narratives and visual practices, from taxidermy, from photography and from the early museum models popularised at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>20</sup>

The myth of the gorilla as a "depraved and vicious" was first constructed around the stories of the French-American colonial traveller Paul de Chaillu; the first white man to capture and kill a gorilla in central Africa in 1885.<sup>21</sup> However, the gorilla as a visual trope appears after with "giant Karisimbi", a gorilla captured by Carl Akeley in the Belgian Congo in 1921. The body of the silver back was stuffed and photographed and its image disseminated as a cultural icon. The skin of his face served to model a mask that would later be included in the collection "Lions, Gorillas and their Neighbours".<sup>22</sup> Shortly after the scientist died, the remains of the gorilla were placed onto the body of a mannequin using the tools of taxidermy and displayed inside an installation in Akeley's African Hall at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1936. In Akeley's display, the "giant" is accompanied by a female and her offspring— constructing an image of a heterosexual animal family (although in reality animals belong to a wide variety of groups) in the garden of Eden.

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<sup>19</sup> Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City 1908-1936", in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York: Routledge, 1989.

<sup>20</sup> This relationship between scientific practice, museums and popular culture exists not only with the case of the giant Karisimbi and King Kong, but also with the story of Jumbo: an elephant exhibited in Paris, London and New York who died in Ontario in 1880 run over by a train. Jumbo would be the first animal to be dissected and displayed in a museum under the hand of P.T Barnum for the American Museum of Natural History. Barnum bought an elephant called Alice and organized a show with her in which the "bride in mourning" accompanied the dissected body of Jumbo. In 1941, Disney studios would transform Jumbo into Dumbo, the flying elephant.

<sup>21</sup> Paul de Chaillu, *Nouvelles aventures de chasse et de voyage chez les sauvages*, Paris: Ed. Michel Levy, 1875.

<sup>22</sup> Carl E. Akeley and Mary L. Jobe Akeley, *Lions, Gorillas and their Neighbors*, New York: Dodd and Mead, 1922.

For Haraway, Akeley is Victor Frankenstein and the gorilla is his invented creature. In the 1920's Carl Akeley was considered to be not only a scientist but also an artist. Taxidermy (a complex system of representation of the body that includes dissection, treatment of the skin, photography, the construction of masks, sculpture, anatomical reconstruction and theatrical display) was both a technique of production of biological knowledge as well as an art of the theatricalisation of life indispensable for the development of the modern natural history museum. The enlightened museum not only intends to produce and preserve the memory of the nation, but also functions to reproduce "nature" within urban space: the museum is the theatre of humanisation in which the gorilla is made visible as humanity's extreme animal origin.

Within scientific discourses and practices, the great primate is the border figure who stands between the differences of the species, races, genders and sexualities that still dominate the taxonomy of the living today. Situated by the dominant discourse on the other side of the threshold of humanity, the gorilla appears as the fallen angel of evolution. The fictionalised body of the gorilla (together with the indigenous African, the mad woman, the sexual deviant, the disabled...) would later provide the biological discourse with the counter-figure necessary to produce "a specific type of human unity: namely, the affiliation to a single species, a human race, the *Homo sapiens*."<sup>23</sup> The Gorilla is represented as the "animal double" of the white man in the same way that the woman is his "feminine double": his other, his limit. Otherness and frontier.

Donna Haraway highlights that the pictorial and photographic representation of the "human face" is situated in the centre of this epistemological project of the hegemony of the *Homo sapiens*. In a narrative of continual evolution, the human face marks out a point of rupture for modern anthropology. Within the taxonomy of species, genders, sexes and races that separate human from animal, civilized from primitive, feminine from masculine, heterosexual from homosexual, the human face resists the "mask of the gorilla" in order to assert evolutionary hegemony.

King Kong, the cinematographic popularisation of the giant gorilla myth, ends up humanising the animal: the gorilla is given a face, or rather a mask. At the same time, King Kong also becomes the romanticised victim of colonial-scientific languages and practices, acting as a vengeful killer of his human colonisers and alter-ego. The impossible love story between King Kong and the blonde western woman is not only an eroticised transposition of the prohibition of interracial sexuality imposed by a colonial regime, but also a desperate drama of identification and desire for revolt. Like the great primate, the body of the woman, sexualised and naturalised, is also situated in a subaltern position with respect to the body of the white man. Face to face on the map of biopolitical classification, the western woman and the gorilla look at each other and recognise each other— perhaps they even exchange their masks. As Joan

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<sup>23</sup> Donna Haraway, *Testigo\_Modesto @Segundo\_Milenio.HombreHembra\_Conoce\_Oncorata*, Barcelona: Editorial UOC, 2004, p.249

Riviere, read through Virginie Despentes, would have said; behind the mask of socially imposed 'femininity' is the face of King Kong.<sup>24</sup> And vice versa.

It is here where the artist recuperates the gorilla and his mask, in order to put on the gorilla's mask; in order to show it, reclaim it, authorise its history. This is the stage on to which Elly Strik's performances and rituals intervene.

The process, repeated on various occasions as a method of production between 2004 and 2005, is the following: the artist puts on the gorilla's mask and takes a photo of herself that will later serve as a base for the work. The final image is the result of the overwriting and overlapping of at least four elements: body, mask, image, photograph and paint. It is a performative ritual while the drawing remains its two-dimensional trace. Following a similar process, in *Bride* (2002), the paint is layered to the point of opacity, obscuring the face in a state of invisibility. Other times, as in *Beaucoup de fleurs* or *Your Look Will Give the Angels Strength* (2001-2010), Elly Strik subjects the image to the subtraction of layers as if the paintbrush were an archaeologist's tool. Far from a task in representation, Strik reverses the order of surface to depth by equipping the paint with an X-ray machine or a carbon-dating vision intentionally designed to reveal what the eye can't see. Subterranean imaginaries are made visible and a blackened skull or an embroidered veil is presented where the skin should be.

In the oil and lacquer paintings *The Same* (2005) and *Herodiade* (2005), Strik represents a liminal moment in which a white biped humanoide removes a gorilla mask from its face. In *The Same* there are no features that allow for the identification of the body engaged in this action: except for an arm and a pair of shoes, there doesn't seem to be anything underneath the translucent dress. Again, the repeated motif of the silk tulle netting becomes a cosmic landscape; a crystal that reveals the structure of time. The mask is suspended—the giant uprooted spectral figure is caught between taking it off and putting it on. Like the dress, the mask acts as a veil, an interface, a filter and a screen. What is made evident here is that beneath the mask the face is not human but rather a second primate. The mask (a veil but also a layer of paint) is the agent of a process of becoming, implicating a series of alterations to visual languages that had previously codified femininity and animality.

The identification between the feminine humanoid body and the primate is intensified in *Veronika* (2005): when the gorilla mask is removed the feminine body remains faceless. Strik's Veronika wears a shroud imprinted with the image of her own simian face. In *Speak woman, what shall I give you?* (2004), a humanoid body dressed in a bride's veil and gorilla mask lifts up the lace to show us her legs and bare feet. The spectre of the giant Karisimbi has returned dressed as a bride. The darkness of the face and the intensity of the expression of the gorilla act as a centre of gravity that pulls in the rest of the painting. The spectator's gaze looks for that of the gorilla; it is captured by the mask that terrifies and fascinates. In *ES* (2004) the threat is accentuated with the wide-open mouth of the gorilla mask, which contrasts with the inoffensive red skirt

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<sup>24</sup> Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as Masquerade", in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. X, 1929, pp. 303-313.



adorned with a bow. In *Fay Wray* (2005), another humanoide body with a gorilla mask discovers that underneath the feminine dress there grows patches of black hair that cover the shoulders and chest. The opposition primate/human, masculine/feminine, dressed/undressed is marked out by the division of pictoric space into two bands of colours: blue and green. The animal mask and chest are turned to face the front, challenging the viewer and any voyeuristic recuperation or pathologization of the body. What remains is the transformative force of the process of empowerment as revelatory metamorphosis.

It would be naïve to reduce the complexity of the gorilla mask (and its potential to undo the dominant narratives of anthropology) to the feminine-masculine opposition. The gorilla is neither masculine nor feminine, the mask is there to undo, recalling the Guerilla Girls strategy of “mask-ularity”.<sup>25</sup> It is not identity that characterises the work of Elly Strik but rather the process of becoming; the energy that is created when a spectre fights to emerge from invisibility; the impossibility of reducing the work to a unique effect or a closed form. Under the mask the mutation never ceases: the gorilla is the bride and the bride is Goya, Goya is ES and ES is Ophelia, Ophelia is the self-fertilising bride and the self-fertilizing bride is the elephant woman and the elephant woman is the child and the child is the gorilla and the gorilla is time that seeks to hide beneath the mask.

Paris, September, 2013

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<sup>25</sup> Gaetane Lamarche-Vadel mentions how the Guerrilla Girls used the mask as a mode of undoing the opposition between masculine and feminine. The mask, they say, allows for the reconstruction of a kind of “mask-ularity”. Cited in Gaetane Lamarche-Vadel, Elly Strik, presentation in the exhibition *Species* in Gallery DIX291, 2008. See also Guerrilla Girls, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1995.