

## Flourishing Biographies

The original meaning of the Greek word for 'biography' is "to write life", to draw someone's lifelines in words. Within literature, the biography is one of the oldest genres – the Romans, for example, authored both autobiographies and biographies. Today, written biographies are on all bookshops' bestseller lists, and featuring motley and diverse destinies help the daily press to sell copies in the thousands. The purple press – scandals and the cult of personalities – has also moved into the TV studios and people to be portrayed are disrobed in front of live cameras: it might be the wet dream of neo liberal individualism. To call these activities biographies may be going too far, but interest in, and more, the exploitation of, the individual - the desire to elicit from someone his or her life story, to portray a person – is a fundamental element of our daily mass medial existence.

At the same time, the biography as a form of historical research has undergone a fundamental change. From having long been a popular instrument in the predominating focus on the "great personalities" of history (read great men - kings, generals, philosophers and scientists), the biography gave way to the structuralist perspective during the 1960s and 70s. The overriding courses of events were granted the privilege of mediating the spirit of the times or development within the framework of further social and ideological issues. In this context, the individual became primarily a representative of, for example, his or her class, occupation and gender. At present, however, biography is once again approved by historians, not least thanks to the feminist researchers' insistence that the personal is political. Also queer theory's making invisible biographies visible has contributed to its resuscitation. How we organize and live our lives, big and small, major and minor, tells us a great deal about not only our political system and psychological structures but also individual characteristics and private preferences. One advantage with the particular individual as analytical object is that he or she often encompasses ideas that are ideologically or logically incompatible. Therefore, the individual can be a fascinating focal point between the general and the unique, where what is structurally regulated in the large systems is combined with the more unpredictable in the person's actions.

Given this background, it is hardly surprising that biographies have flourished during the last decade, especially among young artists. They have also been nurtured by the intensive discussion on identity, which has pervaded art since the middle of the 1980s. If one wishes to illuminate and question gendered or ethnic identity and its genesis, then creating and/or investigating how narratives of individual lives are shaped lies close at hand. It is worth recalling that the biographical is distinguishable from the identity-related in that biography claims to create a context of more than one event, or one part of a whole, rather than to emphasize one single issue. Biography has a narrative side where single entities are woven together into a story with a subject clearly in view.

Upon closer scrutiny, three main categories emerge within the biographical interests of contemporary art. The first category consists of work where the artist concentrates on him or herself and his/her own (hi)story. For the sake of simplicity, let us call this autobiography, with claims to be documentary. Elke Krystufek is one of the artists who consistently use this form when she exposes herself in photographs and videos, in paintings and performances. She willingly describes private relationships - people close to her often figure in her work. This self-exposure and sometimes traumatic biographical narrative form reaches its peak with Tracey Emin, who, for example, in front of a video camera in "Why I Never Became a Dancer" described how as a teenager she used dance as a defense against the boys who exploited and insulted her. In another video, she talks about the difficult experience of an abortion. With bold self-assertion, but also with a desperate need for confirmation, she eventually founded "The Tracy Emin Museum" in a former shop in London. The museum contained only her work and she herself was both museum director and hostess, who received visitors and answered prying, impertinent questions. Something of a Swedish counterpart to Tracey Emin, Pål Hollender works with his experiences of childhood sexual abuse in his videos. In his hands, art becomes a weapon against those people who abuse children – but unfortunately, also a means for new violations.

Less spectacular is Fiona Tan's video documentary, "May You Live in Interesting Times", which takes off from the TV documentary as a form. The story begins with the artist's Indonesian/Chinese father and Anglo-Saxon mother and follows branches of their large family tree all the way to a small Chinese village where most of the inhabitants bear her surname. Although full of biographical details, the video is nevertheless primarily an investigation of the artist's mixed cultural background and identity. In the end, Fiona Tan has to admit that she feels neither Chinese nor Western. The biographical here is part of a construction that is more defined by what it isn't – a negation – than what it really is.

Something of this negation also exists in several of Deimantas Narkevicius' films, which belong to the second category of biography. This category may quite simply be defined as "portraits". With a technique and visual language tightly bound together with the context, Narkevicius has often given the main role in his films, which are based on documentary material, to someone who has acted creatively in a situation that does not encourage creative actions. The person in the leading role is never shown, but his or her story is related in spoken words and with other means of description. An example of this is the Jewish woman who tells us about growing up in Kaunas, how she survived the ghetto in Vilnius, joined the Communist partisans and went on to work for four decades in a statistical institute. Another example is the man who got on the wrong side of the prejudicial Soviet legal system and was therefore placed in a mental hospital where he was broken down and finally died. These people are portrayed with tenderness, but they also acquire something of the neglected hero, whose fate should qualify them for more official commemorative monuments.

One of the first artists to adopt home video aesthetics in her video portraits was Gitte Villesen. In a series of work, she had Willy, an old man and one of her parents' neighbours in the Danish countryside, talk about his life, bit by bit, with great intensity. He plays his records for Gitte and reminisces; he shows her his car and tells us about some of the over 60 vehicles he has owned; and he plays with his cats. The camera wobbles and it is all very like everyday life. The warmth existing between the artist and her model spills over to the viewers – we are drawn into the video, we feel we are in the same room. Atmospheric rooms, which are simultaneously portraits, are rather characteristic of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. The home as an image of a person's background and habits is the point of departure for the more than 50 room installations in the series "Les chambres de couleur", made in 1988-95. Each installation has a colour that functions as an emotional "projection screen", and the few furnishings and other objects present give biographical clues to the person being portrayed. Her portraits span as wide and diverse a range of people as the director Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the gallery owner Esther Schipper. To Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, the biography is an exciting form for transferring a kind of knowledge that should be a subject in its own right in schools.

The third category of biographies is the fictive or fictional biography – biographies that are made up and more or less imaginative. Ann-Sofi Sidén's QM, Queen of Mud, has been endowed with a fantastic biography: created by the scholar Dr Johnson, she was under his control for 18 years. She was deprived of most human characteristics in order to facilitate her traveling in space and carrying out her task: namely to lead the human race forward to other solar systems. Clad only in a thin layer of mud, QM can travel in space, but she has also appeared in NK in Stockholm, where she tested perfume until the security guards chased her out. In the film, "QM, I think I call her QM", she becomes the subject of the paranoid psychiatrist, Ruth Fielding's examinations. After the psychiatrist finds QM under her bed one morning, the film develops into a drama about what could be a mother and daughter relationship; but it is also a thriller in which the mystery of QM's identity is to be solved. At present QM is busy having a museum set up for her. The first presentation of this will take place at Moderna Museet in 2004.

In comparison with QM, Walid Ra'ad's Souheil Bachar is much more down to earth. He is presented as an Arab, a former embassy employee who was taken hostage in Lebanon and incarcerated together with a group of Western men. In the archives of the fictitious foundation, the Atlas Group, whose brief it is to research and document the history of modern

Lebanon, there are a number of videos in which Souheil Bachar relates his experiences in crowded cells together with homophobic and xenophobic prisoners. Well-known historical events are mixed together with intimate descriptions of emotional states. Were it not for the exaggerated psychological oscillations one might very well take the Bachar tapes to be real. But how credible they are is less important here for Souheil Bachar is about the impossibility of being objective, about the blind spots and distorted perspectives of history writing.

The list of artists who work biographically can be made long, and that of biographical works, even longer. In contemporary art, private and actually experienced life stories are alternated with made-up and mythological biographies. The ordinary and everyday exists in tandem with the spectacular and traumatic. Sometimes artists focus on someone else's life, but more often on their own. Some artists have been accused of being narcissistic, others socially pornographic. I often find myself wanting more digestion and displacement– at the cost of a biographical 'ready-made', for dealing directly with a bit of a subjective life history is extraordinarily difficult. Nevertheless, it is clear that the destiny of the particular individual has played – and still plays – an important role as a theme and field of action in contemporary art.

Maria Lind