

A Respectful Distance: The Negotiation of Space in Margareta Kern's *Clothes for Death*

To invite a stranger into your home is a gesture of hospitality; to show them the clothes in which you wish to be buried, is an act of trust; to allow them to take your photograph surrounded by such intimate possessions – knowing that it will be seen by others you have never met, in countries you may never have been to – is an extraordinary act of faith.

In her ongoing project *Clothes for Death*, Margareta Kern researches and documents women in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina who prepare and set aside their own funeral clothes, a custom still practised predominantly among the region's Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic communities. Some of the women she meets are well into their nineties, their lives shaped by the unsettled history of the Balkans. The clothes, wrapped in sheets or kept in plastic bags and suitcases, ensure they will be dressed in readiness to meet God, and satisfy their wish to give pride and comfort to their families.

In her travels Kern occupies an ambiguous position as 'stranger'. Although now based in London, the terrain she covers to reach the small and often isolated villages in which these women live is that of her childhood and adolescence. Her journey takes her across landscapes divided and subdivided since her departure at the outbreak of the Bosnian War (1992–5), through renamed railway stations, past new mosques and churches, and beside ruined buildings dotted with bullet holes. *Clothes for Death* is a powerful meditation on death as it intersects with life. It is also a means through which Kern reflects upon the construction of identity – her own, as much as those she photographs – and a complex dialogue with the land, culture and people.

Voyeuristic by nature, photography and anthropology share a history in which the marginalised, the colonised, those whose traditions are seen to be vanishing are caught in relations of power: subjects turned objects. Through what means can the

photographic subject retain her dignity, actively engaging in the process of her representation? Susan Sontag argues that the camera makes us a tourist in other people's reality (and eventually in our own)¹. But is some kind of mutual exchange possible between photographer and photographed?

During her travels Kern keeps a blog. Early on she reflects on the ethical dimensions of the project, for although each participant has consented to being photographed, she is troubled by 'a sense of having taken something away'². Back in London she ponders on the relationship of physical and psychological space in the making and viewing of images. It is here, in the negotiation of spatial relations – degrees of closeness and distance – that Kern addresses these ethical questions. I am moved by all of the photographs that make up *Clothes for Death*. But there are two in particular: the first, serene, well ordered, almost symmetrical in composition; the second, more random, a restlessness about it.

Liza (Donja Vrba, Croatia), 2006, dressed in dark garments and black headscarf, is seated sideways in silhouette. High upon whitewashed walls hang framed reproductions: *The Last Supper*, the Virgin Mary. Her burial clothes, at the centre of the image, lie directly below a crucifix. Hands resting upon her lap, she gazes across folded garments, beyond exquisitely embroidered cottons. Behind her is a bed stacked with cushions and pillows. To the far side of the room another, neatly made, yet somehow vacant.

The image evokes something of a seventeenth-century Dutch painting, with its focus on the domestic interior, the space of the 'feminine', and like a *vanitas*, displays objects of daily use: a bowl of fruit, a jug, a lace cloth; the ordinary and inanimate. Indeed the *nature morte* is by definition that which cannot move or is dead. Yet the careful staging of objects, often before a blank vertical wall, removes them from real life and emphasises the spatial field around them. It gives them physical intimacy, yet metaphysical distance.³ Kern's photographs are also staged. But if the *vanitas* is a meditation on the transience of earthly pleasures, the interiors Kern photographs appear stark, even austere; and the women here need no *memento mori*, no reminder of the brevity and frailty of life. The custom they practise is, in itself, a means to confront death, perhaps even control it.

For Kern's project each participant decides how she will display her burial clothes, and how she herself wishes to appear. Something of this 'before' of the photographs – the unwrapping, gesturing and explaining, the unfolding, placing and arranging of the

clothes – is distilled within the final image. This is most striking in *Rosa (Banjica, Bosnia-Herzegovina), 2007*, who sits at the edge of her bed, her clothes for death draped randomly beside her and over the open wooden chest to her right, the floor scattered with yet more clothes and a tartan blanket lying in a heap.

In order to see, we need some distance. Kern sets the camera at the eye level of the woman she is photographing, but always with something – an expanse of carpet, a table, a pile of clothes – in between. It is in here that the tension of closeness and distance is regulated. To make the staged nature of the photographs explicit, all participants (with the exception of Liza) look directly at the camera, acknowledging its presence. This outward gaze draws us in, yet also requests that we keep a respectful distance. To find our gaze met is disconcerting.⁴ It urges us into a relation, that of the shared or ‘mutual gaze of equality’, in which we are asked to recognise ‘a human presence who is alive to our own presence’⁵ and to whom we bear an ethical responsibility.

The shared gaze is one means through which Kern negotiates the sensitivities of the project, but there are others. Much has been written about the haptic, the visual that summons the tactile. Tactility suggests proximity – closeness, intimacy. In *Clothes for Death* the eye registers surface upon surface, cloth upon cloth. While working on the project Kern changed to a medium-format camera in order to achieve as much detail as possible. This, together with a clear natural light, emphasises shape, outline, form, as if to make everything visible. In the photograph of Rosa, the light takes us across the white cotton garment displayed on her bed, down to the ball of white wool unravelling on the floor, across to the chaotic heap beside the rug, up to the garments placed on the open chest, further up to the scarf knotted beneath Rosa’s chin, and round again. Yet in this cloth world, of which Rosa is a part, the lingering pleasure of touch and texture is oddly restrained.

If the image of Liza evokes a Dutch still-life, that of Rosa also has something of the Spanish Baroque and its excessive curves. Writing of the still-life paintings of Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664), Norman Bryson notices how, in *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose* (1633; Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena, California) the artist creates a harsh light to destabilise the waxy materiality of the fruit into unfamiliar forms.⁶ Kern’s use of light, though hardly a dramatic chiaroscuro, distorts and unsettles too. In *Rosa*, a small square of folded pink cloth appears to float just above the floor and the dishevelled rug folds to strange *trompe-l’oeil* effect. In another photograph, that of *Mara (Orubica, Croatia), 2007*, it turns dark cloth into

heavy hard-edge forms, while a crisp scallop-edged towel looks as if it might slip to the floor. What Bryson identifies, and what Kern in her own way produces, is a push-pull effect:

Zurbarán first creates a scene which greatly depends on ideas of touch and the memory of hands, and belongs to the visually lazy or sightless journeys of the body through its immediate envelope of space. Then he floods the stage with light, separates visual from tactile form, and offers the eye – alone – a spectacle so immaculately self-contained that the only appropriate response is to disown the tactile reflexes as crude and ham-fisted.⁷

Tactile or bodily space is in constant movement, like the animated heap at Rosa's feet. A blue cloth curls close to her slippered foot, but sharp light undoes the tactile space: not for us to imagine feel and fold. The denial of the haptic is important, as Bryson points out: 'Only by forgetting ideas of tactile or kinaesthetic space can the viewer approach the painting without intrusion.'⁸ It is also through the interplay of visual and tactile space that closeness and distance are mediated.

The more I look at the disorderly jumble at Rosa's feet – and I can't stop looking at it – the less I understand how it sits in space. It is as if the rug, the blanket and the folded pink square have a life of their own. Bryson, examining the uncanny effect of *trompe-l'oeil* in still-life painting, notes that 'it is as though it is the objects that make the world, and the unconscious force stored in their outwardly humble forms – not their human users.'⁹ In the image of *Rosa*, cloth is charged with an innate potential that both attracts and unsettles.



'All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.'¹⁰

To permit a stranger to take your photograph surrounded by the clothes in which you wish to be buried is not only an act of faith, but a profound act of sharing. As the project progressed, Margareta Kern recounts how, pausing briefly for perhaps less than a second before clicking the shutter, she became increasingly aware of 'the moments of stillness present between myself and the person I [was] photographing.'¹¹ Susan Sontag describes photography as 'an elegiac art... touched with pathos.'¹² Kern's photographs have a melancholic air about them, so to ask how absence is inscribed within *Clothes for Death* may seem absurd. It's there of course in the

display of carefully selected clothes worn only in death; the Christian iconography that adorns so many rooms; the unstinting gaze that pierces each image. But it also lurks in the very organisation of pictorial space: the sparse whitewashed walls that corner the diminutive figure of Rosa; the materiality of their uneven surfaces and small soft shadow cast upon them; the open wooden chest emptied of burial clothes; and similar effects across the series – an empty cardboard box; the ‘vacant’ bed that Liza faces, as if at a wake; stretches of windowless walls, the occasional window, blinded with light, like a blank canvas. Yet death is constantly interrupted by the detail of life, in all its ordinariness: a blue mug, a bedside light, a carton of juice. Death and life in uncanny relation.

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- 1 Susan Sontag (1977), *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London, 1979, p.57.
- 2 Margareta Kern, *Clothes for Death*, a-n Projects unedited blog “http://sites.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/projects/single/384946”, entry 31 March 2007. My essay draws on the blog, a studio visit in November 2007, email correspondence with the artist 19 February 2008, and Beth Greenacre’s brief interview with the artist, 25 September 2007 at: “http://www.artrabbit.com/features/features/september_2007/clothes_for_death”
- 3 *Objects of Desire, The Modern Still Life*, (exhibition leaflet), Hayward Gallery, South Bank Centre, London, 1997. See also the catalogue of the exhibition, *Objects of Desire, The Modern Still Life*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, 1997.
- 4 Roland Barthes, (1953) ‘The World as Object’ in Susan Sontag ed., *A Barthes Reader*, Vintage, London, 2000, p.72.
- 5 Margaret Olin, ‘Gaze’, in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2003, p.328. In her discussion of the shared gaze Olin draws upon the work of Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Emmanuel Levinas.
- 6 Norman Bryson, (1990) *Looking at the Overlooked, Four essays on Still Life Painting*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001, p.74. *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose* is the title of the painting, as given in Bryson’s text. However, the Norton Simon Museum website gives it as *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose*, http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_title.asp?id=F.1972.06.P
- 7 *ibid.*, p.76
- 8 *ibid.*, p.75
- 9 *ibid.*, p.142
- 10 Susan Sontag, *op. cit.*, p.15.
- 11 Margareta Kern, *Clothes for Death*, a-n Projects unedited blog, entry 13 April 2007.
- 12 Susan Sontag, *op. cit.*, p.15.