

A woman who...

A woman who saw herself disappear. A working title – one that has disappeared – of Alice Anderson's most recent film looks like the title of an episode of *Friends*. But Alice Anderson's short has nothing to do with the famous American sitcom. Neither with movies, Hollywood or any other, featuring a disappearance. A quick digital data bank search shows "*Chronicle of a Disappearance*" by the Palestinian, Elie Suleiman, 1996, "*The Day We Disappear*", 2001, by one Carl Savillo, a director whose biography is nowhere to be found and who would fade away too if there weren't his film; there is a Czech feature film classified anonymously, "*Where Has the Class Disappeared?*" from 1986, and an Ettore Scola, from 1968, "*Will Our Friends Succeed In Finding Their Friend Who Disappeared In Africa?*", 1968; among silent films there is "*The Man Who Disappeared*", 1914, by Charles Brabin, and "*The Woman Who Fooled herself*", 1922, by Charles Logue. And there is even a "*The Sausage-Maker Who Disappeared*", by Toralf Sando, billed as one of the first comic Norwegian films ("Forsvundne polsemaker, Den", 1941.

"*The Lady Vanishes*": in French, Hitchcock's breathless film is kin to "*Une Femme Disparaît*" and Alice dips into Hitchcock's bag of tricks more than once. The former, shot in 1942 in Switzerland, by director Jacques Feyder, features Françoise Rosay in four roles: those of four women who look so much like each other that they merge in the skin of one actress alone. This is not insignificant in the context of Alice Anderson's cinema.

Numerous women disappear, for sure, in film scenarios but also in literature – if there were only one to mention it would be the most famous, Proust's Albertine, who springs forth, unexpected, in a novel, and then disappears from view, and thus from the narrator's grasp but not from his obsession. But if Googling, the lazy method, is used to make an approximate search, it has to be admitted that few women see themselves disappear or even worse saw themselves disappear. Apparently, gender has an importance when the search engine, in its inscrutable workings, suggests: "*Try with this spelling: the woman who saw himself disappear*".... The masculine disappears, but that's nothing new when recalling the writer Monique's Wittig's reasoning: "Gender is used in the singular because in reality there are not two genders; there is only one: the feminine, the "masculine" not being a gender. Because the masculine is not the masculine but the general. Which means there is the general and the feminine..."<sup>1</sup> A person of the masculine gender can thus see himself disappear in the universal.

Let's return to Alice, in Alice. In her short fictions (between eight and fourteen minutes) and not only the most recent - because this can be traced back to her very first videos – the feminine gender mark is very present, at least among the characters represented. This specific sign shines through in Alice Anderson's five filmed "tales" made in the last few years. *National Institute of High Research* (NIHR)<sup>2</sup> from 2002 features two young women, one who is wandering around looking for a film, called, by chance, "Front Row", and the other who is supposedly making it possible for her to find it, but who, in fact, completely controls the poor applicant's goings and comings, tossed around at will in the machine of interminable bureaucracy. *No More Fears*, from 2003, has the masculine character disappear a few minutes into the film, leaving two future partners, Betty and Alice, get rid of all memory and even more: Alice begins an operation of disaffection, or rather of disinfection, a removal of feeling and emotion. Surgery is performed by a woman doctor (and her nurse) in a specialized institute with, how bizarre, an operating theatre named Anderson, that puts the heroine through all the colors of the photographic spectrum (from magenta to cyan). "Stop the colors!!!" Marnie yells like an echo. Alfred Hitchcock's eponymous heroine is phobic of red that she sees during a storm, and that covers the whole perimeter of the screen. It is not insignificant, as will be seen later on, that Hitchcock's film belongs to the psychoanalytic mystery film genre, with the simplicity of the title reduced to a first name, *Marnie*, referring back to Freud's case studies.

*The Idiot of Evenville*, 2004, is an idiot (*l'Idiote de Lisseville*, in French), if a doll, bearing the name of Caroline and who is 12 years old, can be given a gender. This doll has lost her memory for five years and takes a radical decision to make up for lost time. *Souffler n'est pas jouer*, 2005, (*Prompt Book*, or the book the prompter uses in the theater) tackles a brat who is both seven and 14, that makes a holy difference in her athletic capacities: Natasha is a somersault champion. She carries in her sleeve a scribbled word "Willpower" on a scrap of paper that falls out when she falls. (Volonté: a word in the feminine gender in French, but without the characteristic silent "e", it becomes, in fact, an intersex word.) Of course, in this film that takes place in a circus and then in the uppermost room of a manor house, there is a father, whose relation with his daughter is not without financial stakes since with one victorious somersault, she could reimburse a mysterious paternal debt. There is also a little brother but the mother-daughter relationship takes precedence, as in Alice Anderson's first works. She expresses herself here, so to speak, in the silent aggressiveness of each of them, which becomes one of the mechanisms of the tale's anxiety and especially of its climax. Lastly, *The Woman Who Saw Herself Disappear*, 2006, (*La Femme qui se vit disparaître*) gives body and voice to three characters of the feminine gender. The child, her mother and an old woman whose mother – up for grabs - also appears to be the mother of the child. Who disappears? The object or rather the subject of the disappearance is also a subject of discussion. But it is the woman identified as "mother", the intermediary in these three generations, who carries the action giving the title to the film, who is its primary cause. It is she who brought about and brings about the banishing of the one who, "deprived of her body and soul", in voice over, "*And I disappeared, as she desired (...)*".

Who is forever banished, who wanders like a ghost, the child or the old woman? Here, it is not Françoise Rosay who plays four roles at the same time. In her first works, Alice Anderson, fitted with a wig, makeup and *ad hoc* clothes, could hint at the idea that she was interpreting the mother. But in what she herself identifies as her "accounts" – if one believes that something is accounted for – it is more several people who play the same role. A grown girl child coexists with an identical little child. The temporal difference just gets bigger with the years. In her 2002 works, the young women are about the same age. In 2004, the little girl goes to sleep for five years. In 2005, the same character can be both a child and have aged by seven years, "to be a young woman now", as her vexed father lashes out to her. In 2006, a little girl kills a ghost, the ghost who is, most likely, no one else but the child become wrinkled, white-haired woman, in a nightgown, bearing the noble signs of old age and tragedy. This hypothesis would verify that the narrative is endless and that the circle, condemning childhood to proceeding directly to old age and reciprocally, forever begins again.

But it is not only the characters' ages that make them little or big. In the frame, the scales change, increase or diminish both space and time. In the black and white photo series of Alice, there is, for example, one representing the image of a tiny little girl, in front of a very big door (*Anna Years Ago*). The elements that make up the set of *The Woman Who Saw Herself Disappear* appear in the size of the characters or reduced, successively, like models or toys. This principle applies to a tower, a house, the gigantic slate figuration of a horse in an English park, or a thimble. Moreover, the installations in which Alice Anderson places her films – a bed, a rough of a theatre, objects, lighting, etc. - haunt the exhibition places using this same enlargement or reduction principle, involving the gallery in a proxemics or distancing, always a little too strongly exaggerated. Such configurations encourage one to feel both little and big, present and absent, near and far-sighted in these *houses haunted* by the images projected in them.

Freud admitted that there were no other translations "*in several modern languages*" than that of "*haunted house*" to take into account this phrase *Das Unheimliche*, this Uncanny Strangeness that he theorized<sup>3</sup>. Uncanny, because the strangeness, in this term, touches the house, the interior, the self whose familiarity it troubles. Because it is always inside that it takes place *in* Alice Anderson, in the house, in the tower, in the manor house, in the circus, in the library, in fragments of archives, in the medical institute, in the head, in drawn or borrowed elements, and lastly, in the margins of the book and the frame of the image. In her films that open as would the stage of a small theatre, the end, whether it be the fall, the flight, disappearance or expulsion, is not welcomed as a liberation but much more as a question. *A Film About a Woman Who* is the title of the American Yvonne Rainer: a question, but no question mark. Nor suspension points.

If the fairy tale, according to Bruno Bettelheim, simplifies all situations, draws characters and details clearly, all of which are important because they materialize good and evil by their actions, Alice's tales simplify the psychoanalysis of this narrative form. They expose, at the virtual outset, the most clearly drawn conflicts in the psychoanalytic *vulgate*: the Oedipus complex, castration complex, death wish, mirror stage or theme of the double, etc. Once these stereotypes are briefly dealt with, other questions are posed that are far more unwieldy, as these spatial and temporal disruptions inflicted both on the narrative and the form point out, as well as on the notions of differences of sexes and generations. Prior definitions now become insufficient. Was it not Freud who, in the tall tale, saw, hidden under a frightening theme – the appearance of life of a doll, Olympia, in the Hoffmann tale, The Sand Man – another decisive theme of the tale, even more central and strange, that of the sand man who pulls out children's' eyes? Alice's tale would function in the same way, like a 2- or more story rocket delivering its "shrink message" like sand in your eyes.

It is true that the tale, in its written figuration as well as in its contemporary adaptation, filmed by Alice Anderson, makes the perfect soil for psychoanalytic commentary. One sees what happens to little girls when they grow up. Few artists – there are Louise Bourgeois' words, gathered under the title *Destruction du père / Reconstruction du père*<sup>4</sup> (*Destruction of the Father / Resurrection of the Father*) – seem to have been as obsessed by family relations, particularly mother-daughter ones. A paradigm that one finds, treated exaggeratedly in Madame de Sévigné's letters to her daughter, that are absolutely not an application of the classic Oedipal relation - "*they not only represent banal maternal devotion, but a very heartfelt discourse to a daughter*"<sup>5</sup> In this correspondence written by a mother to her daughter the true passion that one expresses to the other takes precedence over all other relations, spelling out, as the scholar Elisabeth Ladenson magnificently shows, a discursive model "*giving voice to a very tight feminine relation*".<sup>6</sup>

Freud also notes, deadpan, that "in fiction, many things are not strangely uncanny that would be if they occurred in life, and that in fiction there are ways of provoking effects of uncanny strangeness that, in life, do not exist". In this sententious tone, one feels an affinity with these language effects that Alice Anderson likes to deliver, incongruously – not without some connection too, with some lines of *Céline et Julie vont en Bateau*, 1974, by Jacques Rivette, that were previously discussed.<sup>7</sup> In Alice, there is: "*A game of chance? Chance is luck sometimes. (Prompt Book)*. Or "*All this for nothing. There's always a reason for everything.*" (NIHR), are among some of the great thoughts.

Such commonplaces show the narrative's fictional and non personal character. The fantastic tale, with the special exception of Gérard de Nerval or Maupassant, sets up the principle of not being "me", not confusing narrator and author. In Alice, little girls are red-haired and are often called Alice, like Lewis Carroll's heroine. The name, the hair. These elements are distinct enough from the flesh and blood reality of Alice Anderson's biography for them to be extracted, here, and for them to point to Alice's red hair and her first name, without raising the autobiographical trap, referring the tales to a past that is none of our business. Didn't Alice the artist invent an institute that, by injections, removes memory, that is, the past as well as the repression of the past and the affects that weigh it down? One couldn't better express the strangeness of being.

The question of the foreigner is clearly one of the most crucial of our "globality"- there's no place you can call home anymore, my dear lady. He or she who doesn't belong either to the nation, to the family, to the group, nor to the thing we are speaking of, he or she who is not known, who is without relation, without relationship with the thing we are speaking of, he or she who insinuates himself or herself into a body<sup>8</sup>, is he only, is she only a unique individual? Of course not. If there is one common characteristic in the world in which we live, it is this incessant movement of peoples – be they refugees, exiles, displaced, transported, walked, armed or disarmed – that travel through our planet in all directions, challenging our conventional notion of frontiers, of space, of belonging and citizenship. Who is the foreigner? Recently, the African-American writer, Toni Morrison, guest curator of the Louvre for the project "The Foreigner at Home", pointed out the depth given by the double meaning, in English, of the apostrophe in the expression "Foreigner's Home", an "apostrophe that can mean either the possessive or an oral contraction. This double meaning is deliberate: the 'at home' of the foreigner (memory, recollection) or the stranger as representation of the 'at home' (citizenship, belonging)"<sup>9</sup> Thus must one proceed within this ambiguity, both being the foreigner and fearing or accepting him/her.

This is very interesting for what concerns us: being the other and fearing it. Like seeing oneself and disappearing. This confusion, in the dialectic that essentializes and excludes at the same time, is certainly at work in Alice Anderson's photos. The foreigner is in oneself, those who are not recognized. Thus, for example, the series of images called *A Beautiful Family*, *Une Belle Famille* in French. The French translation overturns the English, giving a certain ambiguity to the expression. "Une belle famille" in French does not only deal with the veracity of taste. It is also the family of the other, the family of adoption, and if one believes the clichés, of all the difficulties (between mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law, and brother-in-law (Translator's note: "belle" or "beau" here means "in-law")); in fact, the only relation that cannot be "beautiful" is that of wife and husband, or of partners.) This series of beautiful pictures shows humans in situations that seem familiarly familial – meals or meetings: they eat, they dance and above all they take pictures – but cannot be looked at. The visual blurring that appears at the surface of the photos and makes it impossible to see into them brings up an effect of strange "familiarity", both touching and repellent.

The series *My Friends My Enemies* offers a series of pink double pages, like a notebook that would serve as a mat for pictures, first perceived as abstract and then identified as pictures of wood with their knots visible. One might think here of Knot Paintings by Sherrie Levine, 1986, paintings in plywood whose knots and defects are colored pink, gold, white or just varnished. Sherrie Levine, very linked to the 1980s deconstruction art, has had a certain comeback these last few years but strangely so. Rereading this work produces a strange flavor of vulnerability, leading to, almost twenty years later, a biting critical humanization. Thus in 2003 one could read "*Visually, a knothole is a dark orifice in the flat sheet of the wood's skin but also the record of where a branch was sheared off. The plugs may thus be read as bandages for the wound left where phallus-branches have been severed, but they also suggest closed vaginal openings, bringing to mind female circumcision rituals in some African societies, where the labia are stitched shut. (...) This and the "repaired" fleshiness of the wood grain seemed a quiet invocation of mortality*"<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, tree knots, like the appearance of clouds or smoke, have always suggested an anthropomorphic reading. One also finds chance, that intervenes in Alice, both in the distribution of the images, friend and foe, but also in the more or less explicit anthropomorphism of their particular features, with the repetitive suite of the images leaving room for the contingent and the unstable. Thus, the lapping of the water that makes and unmakes the photographic reflection of the *Alices*. Or the mist that invades the trio of images called *A Long Distance Friend*, undoing all the character's bodiliness, just like the portraits bearing the first name Louise, but that do not show her, displaying signs of habitation in the image – a bit of a sofa, a piece of wall hanging, a pouf – for a spectral silhouette. Sherrie Levine explained in 1985 that her work, copies of copies, "*The pictures I make are really ghosts of ghosts (...)* When I started doing this work, I wanted to make a picture which contradicted itself. I wanted to put a picture on top of a picture so that there are times when both pictures disappear and other times when they're both manifest; that vibration is basically what the work's about for me-that space in the middle where there's no picture"<sup>11</sup>. Sherrie Levine probably does not have much to do with the one who concerns us today, but we want to acknowledge here, with Alice, this always-to-be-renewed attempt to reconsider the object according to other criteria than the author's originality or authority.

As in Sherrie Levine, a both humorous and vulnerable reference to the celebration of masculine desire contained in the very notion of the great masters of art can be found in the *Master Photos* that Alice Anderson defines as a series "in evolution". To suggest Bacon's convulsed men, the fingers of a hand are used: a bandaged index finger indicates the bent-over head. *Noir et Blanche* (Black and White), Man Ray's fetish image, becomes somehow *Rouge et Rousse* (Red and Red-Haired): red like Spiderman's mask and red-haired. The invading clouds in a William Blake engraving take the form of a mass of loose hair in which two little plastic horses rear up. *The Nude descending the Staircase* by Marcel Duchamp, taken upside down, then put right side up on its feet, has become a deconstructed sequence of rose fuchsia on which a pair of nude legs with miniscule shoes, gingerly puts a foot. A few other resemblances could be added. For example, the *Saut dans le Vide* by Yves Klein becomes, in *Prompt Book*, little Natasha's jump into space at the sign from her father. "*Erudition is the modern form of the fantastic*", prompted Borges. The quote here is, obviously, a mechanism.

Fluo Pink is used more than once by Alice Anderson. A pink stairway, a pink book, a pink house, in the black matte of night. There are no artificial colors in Anderson's pastiches of the Still Lifes photos but their naturalism is put into question. The pictured objects are caricatures, both in color and form, of their naturalist referents: eggplant, lemon, tomato, orange. Names of fruits or vegetables but also of colors. (Translator's note: aubergine and citron are colors as well as vegetable and fruit). This leads to the question of beginnings, of the original. Opposed to the tale of one life and its contrary is this "*multiplicity and this discontinuity*" that, according to Donna Stanton, determines the history of women, a history they only attain indirectly, by reading in the knots of the texts of culture, where they are missing.

Alice's tales – tales that do belong to the field of art – point up the same lack, that which is at work in the history of cultural avant-gardes where artists could perhaps claim a paternity and fathers, but less easily an artistic maternity and certainly not a feminine genealogy to constitute the sources of their creative gestures. Of course, the modernist history of art, a teleology that has the origin of a modern art going back to Manet, Cezanne and Seurat develop like a thread drawn among great men (Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky, Malevitch, Mondrian, up to Pollock and even Jeff Wall and Jeff Koons), seems obsolete in the dispersion of art called post modern. But nevertheless, no woman artist, or even man or transgender artist either, would dream of calling her or himself the great grand-daughter of Sophie Taeuber, who would have engendered the art of Louise Bourgeois, who would have engendered that of Cindy Sherman, etc. That doesn't work. So it's in the area of absence and not of missing that this genealogy interests us the most.

In our global world genealogical principles are still the reference, in the form of the theme of three generations. On our RSS feed cell phones arrive messages such as: "*The cell phone divides society into three generations; TNS Sofres (translator's note: opinion poll) points out in a study on cell phone use two key ages, 25 and 40 ...*" Or again, this one, concerning a famous restaurant: *three generations of Troisgros are part of the history of French cuisine.*" An exhibition shows *three generations of a /heterogeneous Belgian surrealism, often associated with the figures of René Magritte and Paul Delvaux, that was practiced by other original artists, like Paul Nougé, Marcel Mariën or Tom Gutt, to mention only a few.*" And during a round table on Brazil's recent history, *the eleven women historians interviewed belong to three generations: the women pioneers who began their work and teaching during the 1970s; the women who were trained by the pioneers or their contemporaries, and the younger ones ...*"

Missing in the history of canonical art, women artists have always been the other in the modernist genealogy principle of generational succession, even up to constituting another model, that is a foreign model. Recognition at the end of the twentieth century of women artists on the artistic scene has nothing to do with the celebration of a feminine art: it is simply the sign of the explosion of a principle explaining the history of modern art in terms of passage and transmission. In showing intergenerational or interpersonal relations in the cruel movement of a tale, Alice Anderson simply touches where it hurts: on a collective repression, a ghostly history.

Translated by Sheila Malovany-Chevallier

---

<sup>1</sup> Monique Wittig, "Le point de vue universel ou particulier" in *La pensée Straight*, trad. Paris, Balland, 2001, p. 112

<sup>2</sup> We are leaving the film titles of the original language of the film. Likewise for the photos.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, "L'inquiétante Etrangeté", 'Das Unheimliche, 1919) trad. in *Essais de Psychanalyse Appliquée*, 1933, Paris Gallimard, "Idées", p. 195. The first quarter of the article is devoted to the many possible or impossible meanings and translations of the word "Unheimliche".

<sup>4</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction du père-reconstruction du père: Ecrits et entretiens*, 1923-2000, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac et Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Paris, Galerie Lelong, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Ladenson, *Proust's Lesbianism*, Cornell University Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Elisabeth Lebovici, "Alice Anderson, it doesn't hurt to fall off the moon", *Semaine* 27-04, n° 11, Arles, Analogue, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> These are the definitions of the word "étranger" given by the current Petit Larousse dictionary.

<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, "Etranger chez soi" in *Toni Morrison invitée au Louvre*, collective work, Paris, Christian Bourgeois, series "titre", n° 22, 2006, p. 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> Sherrie Levine at Paula Cooper - New York - small sculpture works and plywood knot paintings ». *Art in America*, by Paul Taplin, July, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Jeanne Siegel, « after Sherrie Levine », *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1985 (reproduced in <http://www.artnotart.com/sherrielevine/arts.Su.85.html>)