

Excerpt from ‘He Wants to Be Young and Beautiful’ by Katarzyna Kosmala

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It could be argued that popularization of the homoerotic look or tomboy's image is associated with youth-inspired fashion, a current trend which is also promoted across all generations. The Finnish-born and Berlin-based artist Anu Pennanen, in her video-installation *La Ruine du Regard* (2010) represents spaces associated with consumption and globalization. Over eight years, she has filmed shopping centres in European cities, including Tallinn, Helsinki and Paris. *La Ruine du Regard* is a twenty-nine-minute multichannel video about Les Halles, a modern underground shopping centre, a leisure space and a hub of the express commuter rail system network built in the early 1980's in central Paris. The young men featured in the film are from the suburban city of Aubervilliers, which borders Paris.

Les Halles is erected on the ruins of the large wholesale marketplace that was demolished in 1971. The actual space of this multi-storey complex seems to attract a commuter population from suburban Paris, such as from Aubervilliers, mostly migrants and working classes, to window shop, to date, to meet friends or go to the movies. They sometimes shop but more often hang around whereas Parisians use Les Halles mostly as a transit route. Pennanen comments on experiences of being situated in such transient non-places, to use Marc Augé's term (1995), public urban spaces of capitalist globalization, spaces of social clashes. Les Halles appears as a place of historically constructed alienation. Pennanen tries to capture a sense of being squeezed in-between the monitoring gazes of others, an experience of being looked at, being caught evaluating others of a diverse ethnic origin and cultural background. The film is showcased as a five-channel installation with specific 'cubic' screen objects, each positioned at a slightly different height, reconstructing a feeling of Les Halles's architectural space and intersecting gazes. Dazzling lights and colours, brand signs, and endlessly descending or ascending corridors construct a labyrinth-like place for endless circulation. The gazes search and miss each other, with fleeting encounters crossing the five screens.

La Ruine du Regard turns around the question of image; the self is envisaged as a projection of surfaces. In Les Halles young people seem to identify themselves through dress codes and styles, rather than social background or domicile. They play with the youth fashion codes. Les Halles is kind of a 'free' zone, where one can make friends beyond the local sub-urban neighbourhoods. By representing fashion signs, through a style of the youth featured in the video as well as displays of the shopping mall, the artist attends to the context of globalization and consumption of one's image. The camera focuses on the young men and women of varied ethnicity, who don't seem to belong there, don't have a place to go, and instead, hang around Les Halles, looking idle but very self-aware. Filmed against the rushing masses of commuters and against the backdrop of hundreds of thousands of monitoring gazes, they seem to be separated from the imposed pulse of speed. Yet, what unites them is their fashion awareness; each individual projects a funky and sporty tomboy-like look. What distinguishes them from the crowds is not only a sense of embodied stillness; it is also a gaze, somewhat more optimistic, naïve and youthful. What Pennanen succeeds in capturing with Les Halles is narcissistic tendencies as correlative of the selfish contemporary society that is obsessed with consumption and 'to buy in order to be' lifestyle in the relentless pursuit of happiness and instantaneous gratification of desire. Christopher Lasch (1978), commenting on the culture of narcissism, tapped into the questions of self-doubt about the materialism-driven consumer society and self-destructiveness of competitive individualism emergent at

that time in North America. In a late capitalist society, an individual is turned into a commodity whose value is measurable based on social status, manifested in appearance, way of speaking and clothing style. In a shopping centre, everybody is looking for products and at each other, turning each other into commodities. Les Halles remains as a space for everyone, and at the same time, a space for no one borrowing Jean Baudrillard's term (1994) it transforms into 'a desert of the real,' a massive architectural construction for passers-by, where everyone is instantaneously judged by monitoring gazes. Les Halles can be seen as a cul-de-sac, a dead end of individualism in the contemporary society preoccupied with the self and driven by conspicuous consumption.

ALTERING DYNAMICS OF THE GAZE

Identity is not neutral. Identity is socially constructed and mirrors a sense of self-presentation and performance in everyday life. There is no doubt that metrosexual masculinity and other emergent masculine forms, promoted by the shifts in fashion and consumption trend as well as the dynamics of the altered gaze, open up the space in which the binary notions of gender and sexual identities appear more easily contestable, erasing or at least loosening up a traditional gender matrix. A destabilization of the traditional look of masculinity has changed a male self-perception, and more generally, the articulation of the self has become more plural. It is partly due to the popularization of a lifestyle that stereotypically can be associated with attributes attached to homosexuality as well as more emergent, mediated forms of consumption and fashion trends based on gender-neutral constructions. We could argue that it is metrosexual masculinity and the fashion world that has successfully queered the notion of traditional male gaze, opening up spaces for transgression of socially constructed gender binaries, and unsettling at the same time, what Connell (1995) refers to, as hegemonic heteronormative masculinity, through the dynamics of looking.

Visual arts practice is a space that can challenge the construction of masculinity more directly, precisely by attending to the gaze. For instance, Jari Silomäki in his series *Rehearsals for Adulthood* comments on the altered gaze and ambiguous construction of gender identity of a young man entering adult life. Looking at the young man and his androgynous, pale nude torso reflected in the sunlight it is impossible to distinguish him from being an object of desire and at the same time him being one that desires. What is however clear, he wants the viewer to look back at him; his narcissistic tendencies are to be materialized by reversing the gaze. In Zofia Kulik's *Garden series* photographs, the naked figure of an immobile man is pinned down like a fragile butterfly on a print, and in a sense, deprived of his carnality through the reproduction process. The overlap-ping of two layers, the sharp image of a poppy flower combined with a slightly blurred black-and-white male figure in the background, results in multidimensional gaze dynamics. The viewer is looking at the flower-man, yet the viewer becomes conscious of his/her own gazing process. As a result, the distance is created which pertains more to the process of looking than to the seen image. A young beautiful man in Jari Silomäki's work as well as Zofia Kulik's flower-man, they want to be seen, they want to be noticed. In both examples, the Narcissus myth is being staged. The viewer is looking at a beautiful, youthful male body; visual seduction in the structure of viewing reaches both male and female audience. In a sense, a structure of viewing transgresses here heteronormative codes. The viewer's gaze is in a sense being queered, regardless of being straight, gay or bisexual.

Metrosexuality has now deeply absorbed by popular culture. Anu Pennanen's work captures narcissistic tendencies of the contemporary society obsessed with consumption, a pursuit of happiness and satisfying of one's desire. In the shopping mall in Paris, Les Halles, a globalized non-place, she films a group of fashion-aware youth of various ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds hanging around there without an immediate purpose, a group somewhat distinct from the mass of passers-by and impulsive monitoring gazes of Parisian commuters. Representing globalization spaces can disrupt the heteronormative matrix by attending to spaces associated with the production of masculinities as well as production of an image, represented in the context of consumption of fashion (for instance, Anu Pennanen's *La Ruine du Regard* discussed in this chapter), global sex tourism (Ann-Sofi Siden's *Warte Mal! Prostitution after the Velvet Revolution*, discussed in Chapter 2) or through representation of spaces associated with the patterns in labor migration and circulation of people across the border (for instance, Adrian Paces *Centro di Permanenza Temporanea* or Tanja Ostojic's *Sans Papiers*, discussed in Chapter 6).

Despite being widely accepted and widely consumed, metrosexuality continues to be seen as a problematic notion in contemporary societal structures. Tim Edwards (2003) reminds us that the well-dressed and well-groomed man projects an image of masculinity that is fashion conscious and taste aware, arousing at the same time anxieties about sexuality, desire and meanings of masculinity. Metrosexuality indeed challenges masculinity that is disinterested in an appearance, based on unfashionable traditional male stereotypes, signifying an unhealthy or unattractive physique and bad hygiene. The notion of metrosexual masculinity is often criticized for lacking authenticity, resulting in a defensive attitude, invoking an image that can be stereotypically associated with the homosexual or the effeminate, an image that is viewed as being at a distance from a 'real man' (Edwards, 2003, 142-43). How does metrosexuality alter the gaze dynamics? Hall and Gough (2011) has emphasized that a self-presentation and style of a metrosexual man invites visual attention of both sexes, evokes anxiety of a sexual identity and often relies on dynamics of the homoerotic gaze (Cole, 2000). In this case, men are being looked at by women and by other men. In Kulik's and Silomäki's works, it is the man that is also looking back at himself, just like Ovid's Narcissus who is totally captivated by the image of his own fair complexion in the pool's reflection. It could be argued that men look at other men and at themselves as practitioners of a thoughtfully crafted style and as fashion-aware individuals. Metrosexual space in general can be viewed as a space where the heterosexual competition drive and homosexual desire seem to blur; rewriting an idea of what is contemporary masculinity and altering permeability of body-related boundaries, including more tactile dimensions, such as gesture, skin texture or poise.