

ART PAPERS

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MATHILDE, MATHILDE: THE ARTIST AND HER DOUBLE JILL DAWSEY

*It is necessary not to be "myself," still less to be "ourselves."
The city gives us the feeling of being at home.
We must take the feeling of being at home into exile.
We must be rooted in the absence of a place —Simone Weil¹*

Berlin-based artist Mathilde ter Heijne appears to have nine lives—if not more. Over the past decade, she has appeared in many of her own videos, and in her installations and sculptural works by way of startlingly realistic mannequins modeled on her likeness. These works have portrayed the artist's death by shooting, suicide bomb, self-immolation, ritual sacrifice, and drowning. On the surface, such an oeuvre might suggest serious suicidal tendencies—so many well-staged rehearsals, or cries for help delivered as artworks.

Yet even as her image is everywhere present, references to the real life and person of Mathilde ter Heijne are altogether absent; the work actively avoids autobiography. Though she models her look-alike dummies directly on her own body, we should caution ourselves against invoking the genre of self-portraiture. These dummies serve primarily as crash-test proxies, enabling her to explore such contested issues as, for example, suicide bomb attacks.



Mathilde ter Heijne, *Victory of a False Self*, 2006, sound installation, life-size silicon dummy, clothes, CD, CD player, amplifier, radio, two chairs

Ter Heijne's mannequins serve as crash-test dummies of sorts, aiding, when necessary, the potentially dangerous mimesis of suicide and self-annihilation that she stages for the camera. She performs these apparently self-destructive acts as a means to investigate such forms of extreme behavior broadly, across diverse geopolitical and historical situations. Her project tackles the tenacious gendered asymmetries that structure experience globally, with a focus on the self-inflicted violence so often perpetrated by women. Ter Heijne's works evince a desire for a radical identification with the experiences of other humans—most often other women—and with experiences as lonely and incommunicable as death itself.

Ultimately, however, ter Heijne's work insists on survival mechanisms and on forms of regeneration, despite its ostensible intimacy with death and destruction. Indeed, her artistic strategies spawn doublings and re-doublings: repetitions of names and texts, of histories and bodies, that amount to curious forms of self-reproduction and self-perpetuation.



Mathilde ter Heijne, stills from *Small Things End, Great Things Endure*, 2001, single-channel DVD, 12:04 minutes.

The video *Small Things End, Great Things Endure*, 2001, shows the artist as a modern-day Joan of Arc engulfed by fire, flames eating at her clothing and hair. Yet, her costume and hairstyle locate the events in the recent past of the 1960s, suggesting that this is not exactly a modern-day violent scenario. A voiceover intones "Be patient, fast, pray. 'Til this war is over," inviting us, perhaps, to read these images in the historical context of the Vietnam War. Media photos of self-immolating monks come to mind: self-sacrifice staged as spectacular protest. Yet what are we to make of the self-immolation of a young woman, alone in a small room?

Ter Heijne took her inspiration for *Small Things End, Great Things Endure* from Margarethe von Trotta's film adaptation of Uwe Johnson's novel *Jahrestage*, which describes a year in the life of Gesine Cresspahl in New York in 1967-1968. Amidst media reports of the Vietnam War, the German-born Gesine recalls her mother's profound guilt over witnessing Nazi atrocities, which culminated in the older woman's attempt to atone for those crimes by setting fire to herself in the family's barn in Mecklenburg. In *Small Things End, Great Things Endure*, ter Heijne adapts von Trotta's adaptation by casting Gesine as the one who cannot bear the knowledge of the wanton violence perpetrated in Vietnam. A voiceover borrowed from von Trotta's film—words spoken by Gesine's mother—accompany Gesine's repetition of her mother's suicide by fire. Von Trotta's film doubles back to Johnson's novel, just as ter Heijne's video doubles back to von Trotta's. Gesine becomes the historical double of her mother, while ter Heijne serves as the double of Gesine. Ter Heijne seems to ask: are we doomed to repeat the histories of past generations?

Ter Heijne raises the same question in the sound installation *1, 2, 3... 10, wie niet weg is, is gezien*, 2000, where ten transistor radios occupy a platform, transmitting political speeches from the mid 1960s to the late 1990s. Played simultaneously, the radios produce a muddled chorus of revolutionary voices. Now and then one catches recognizable fragments: Malcolm X charges the white man with murder, while Gandhi entreats his people not to strike back. Their words are quickly lost amidst speakers, both anonymous and well known, who demand the abolition of apartheid, advocate a future of socialism, and so on. Languages and ideologies compete to be heard. Sounds of the past flit past us, evoking Walter Benjamin's claim that the task of history is to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."² In *1, 2, 3... 10*, feedback and interference obscure history, as sudden flashes interrupt and pressure collective memory.



Mathilde ter Heijne, still from *Mathilde, Mathilde*, 1999, single-channel DVD, 4:29 minutes

For ter Heijne, this problem of historical repetition impacts women even more acutely. Lacking both a voice and a language with which to protest a societal order constituted through violence, and allocated but a minute and marginal place within that order—ter Heijne's female characters speak in mute, violent gestures turned upon themselves. Consider the words of one lovesick woman, spoken as a voiceover in her video, *Mathilde, Mathilde*, 1999:

I only listen to songs.... The more stupid they are the more true. They say things like; "Never leave me..." "I die, living without you." "Without you, I'm an empty shell." "Let me be the shadow of your shadow...."

A slow motion sequence follows these words: falling headfirst, a woman in a raincoat drops from a bridge. Hitting water, her body produces a small splash. Her empty shell, the shadow of a shadow, comes to float calmly in its watery grave. Her voice—or another's—reads something like a suicide note: *My love. I'm going before your desire dies.... I'm going so you'll never forget me. She takes her place among the ghosts of other drowned women, fictional and real—from Ophelia to Edna Pontellier, from Saint Christina to Virginia Woolf.*



Mathilde ter Heijne, still from *Mathilde, Mathilde*, 1999, single-channel DVD, 4:29 minutes

The narrative and soundtrack for *Mathilde, Mathilde* weave together excerpts from three different films where the protagonist is named Mathilde, like the artist herself—François Truffaut's *La Femme d'à côté*, 1981; Jean-Claude Brisseau's *Noce blanche*, 1989; and Patrice Leconte's *Le Mari de la coiffeuse*, 1990. Each is a love story that ends with the suicide of its female lead, sacrificing herself in the name of love—an old story, really, and often told. Yet *Mathilde, Mathilde*, with its repetition of the artist's name, stages a more dramatic doubling of the artist's body—an act that imparts new meanings to the old story.

After the fall, the camera brings us to the edge of the bridge where two women appear, nearly similar in appearance and drenched in rain. We may recognize one, or both of them, as Mathilde ter Heijne. They wear matching raincoats. What's more, this outerwear is identical to that worn by the drowned woman. They hold each other in an awkward, tense embrace, before one begins to tip her twin over the bridge's railing. The twin neither resists, nor reacts. She is inanimate, a dummy—a thing always already dead. The woman struggles to maneuver the dummy's dead weight over the edge, holding her at an angle, swinging her upside down. She almost seems not to want to let go. Then, with a slight push, she releases her. As the dummy falls, the picture fades to white.

For this project, which involved re-shooting the suicide scenes from the three films, ter Heijne had a stunt dummy made—a stand-in for the dangerous scenes. If the special-effects dummy was initially created for practical reasons, ter Heijne found that it had greater significance when it appeared with her on tape. The video's acknowledgement of the dummy as dummy disrupts the illusionism of the staged suicide. The suicide takes place in the realm of fiction; in reality, it is averted. Unlike the broken-hearted Mathildes who have hurled themselves off of bridges, this Mathilde avoids her cinematic fate, offering a substitute Mathilde, a sacrificial lamb in her own shape. In this, she ends the "I'd die living without you" cycle, choosing to live-with or without you.

The production of dummies modeled on her own appearance has become a central component of ter Heijne's practice. On some occasions, the dummies show up in video installations where, featured in the video as well as in the exhibition space, they provide an environmental link between the projected footage and the space we occupy as viewers. Sometimes, the dummies sit inconspicuously in the corner of a gallery. Thanks to hidden built-in speakers, one babbles like a madwoman, another sings along to a love song on a transistor radio, and still another hurls the sorts of insults and repressed thoughts that the artist herself would not dare, or care, to speak. It is as if those mute shop-window mannequins, so admired by the Surrealists, had begun to talk back. The Surrealist Hans Bellmer once projected his sadistic fantasies onto the dolls that he created and photographed his *poupées*. As Hal Foster has argued, Bellmer even wanted to become his dolls in a masochistic way, as a challenge to Nazi authority, and to genital authority more universally.³ Ter Heijne has acknowledged that her use of dummies to stage her own death satisfied her desire to blow up the artistic ego. Yet, blowing up the artistic ego has never been much of a problem for women artists. Bellmer's wife, Unica Zrn, wrote a devastating account of an adolescent girl's journey toward suicide in *Dark Spring*. Shortly after the novel was published, Zrn herself jumped from her apartment window.



Mathilde ter Heijne, *Menschen Opfern [Human Sacrifices]*, 2002, sound installation with dummies (photo: Bernd Borchard)

Ter Heijne's dummies frequently operate as sculptural objects. Arranged in groups, they may form theatrical tableaux. In *Menschen Opfern [Human Sacrifices]*, 2002, five dummies perform as a chorus, acting out a bloody episode from the Greek myth of Iphigenia in Tauris. Two dummies lie slain, victims of human sacrifice. Dressed in funereal black, the other three surround them, praying to a goddess for mercy. One of them holds aloft the severed head of a sacrificial dummy; various dummy body parts are strewn about. All five join together as a chorus, their voices accompanied by bass speakers vibrating the platform beneath them. This gruesome scene is made all the more unsettling by casting the same figure—once again, modeled on ter Heijne in all five roles, so that the "living" dummies may seem to mourn their own deaths, to meditate on their own severed bodies. We may be tempted to compare *Menschen Opfern*, with its multiplication of the artist's image, to an infamous piece by Charles Ray, *Oh! Charlie, Charlie, Charlie*, 1992, in which multiple mannequins resembling the artist stage an autoerotic orgy. If Ray's piece is all irony and pathos a meditation of sorts on the heroic American sculptor turned navel gazing loser ter Heijne's piece may appear too tragic, too earnest too *feminine*. Such a reading would, however, ignore the complex ways in which, for ter Heijne, the roles of victim and mourner, dead and living, become inextricably blurred. This erasure of clear distinctions between previously opposed roles appears more radical when the work is read in the context of contemporary politics: though ter Heijne invokes an ancient scene of human sacrifice, she created the piece in response to horrific images of the Dayaks of Indonesian Borneo fighting immigrant settlers in 2001.



Mathilde ter Heijne, still from *Suicide Bomb*, 2000, single-channel DVD, 5 minutes

For some time, ter Heijne's work has explored aspects of human experience that are generally portrayed by mainstream media as wholly *other* to the Western viewer, and thus inaccessible, impenetrable, unimaginable. If, in *Mathilde*, *Mathilde*, ter Heijne sought to explore the social and psychological dynamics of female suicide in the private context of the love affair, subsequent projects have seen her questioning the place of love, desire, commitment, and self-sacrifice with respect to the public actions of terrorist organizations. It is a naïve cliché to assert, as so many Americans do, that everything changed on September 11, 2001, the moment when terrorism was seen to re-enter American public discourse. Such views can only be upheld from a privileged—and obscured—vantage point. Ter Heijne's work attests to the fact that everything did *not* change. The artist had, in fact, been investigating the growth of terrorist activity on the world stage since the late 1990s. Specifically, she wanted to know about women's involvement in terrorist organizations. Her research yielded some surprising statistics. In prominent groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, and the Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey, an extraordinarily high number of women performed suicide attacks—about half of all suicide operations, and in certain groups, even more. In addition, the percentage of women engaged in such attacks was particularly high when compared with women's involvement in other aspects of these organizations. Ter Heijne began to ask: do women sacrifice themselves more readily than men? Is this a transcultural phenomenon? Is it also trans-historical?

These questions prompted her to make *Suicide Bomb*, 2000, a video in which she performs the role of a female suicide bomber. For this project, the artist solicited the expertise of a professional special-effects team to wire a dummy with explosive devices. The video's opening scene shows ter Heijne wrapped in a black trench coat, standing in front of a graffitied wall, near what seems to be a bus stop. With a jump cut a dummy replaces her, and momentarily we witness the first of several spectacular explosions. The jump cut is far from subtle, and *Suicide Bomb* goes to great lengths to disrupt conventions of illusionist video and documentary reportage. Technicians are subsequently shown emerging from behind the scenes to work with the dummy's wiring, while ter Heijne brushes cosmetic products on her dummy's face, comparing it to her own in a mirror.

Suicide Bomb's English voiceover sounds neutral and authoritative. It features information drawn from varied, and even ideologically conflicting, sources—an international *Countering Suicide Terrorism* conference held in Israel, an Arab website article on an Islamic ruling on the permissibility of martyrdom, and so on. "Apparently," the narrator tells us

coolly, "it is women's wish or ability to sacrifice themselves out of devotion for the organization they belong to, and sometimes out of love for its leaders, that makes them more often volunteer for such missions." *Love for its leaders?* Are we meant to understand that female suicide bombers and the bridge-jumping French Mathildes are motivated by the same impulses? Ter Heijne refrains from providing answers. She allows this depoliticized and essentialist reading of female terrorist activity to exist alongside other statements: suicide bombing, for example, is also seen as "a strategy of the weak against the apparently strong." This too might apply to the Mathildes and this reading, at least, lends tactical force to their actions, as to those of the female bombers. The voiceover continues: "the main reason for the attack is not the destruction or killing itself, but to convey vital public information, as a communication strategy." The same might be said for ter Heijne's own video suicides. She lends a new face—her own—to the suicide bomber. Avoiding a moral stance toward suicide bombing, her performance of this action may be seen as a radical gesture. While such violent activities might be described as legitimate force when deployed by non-state entities, in mainstream Western parlance it is almost universally deemed terrorist, with its attendant associations of primitivism, extremism, and derangement. Ter Heijne holds such judgments at bay, wondering instead what it might mean to walk in the shoes—or inhabit the body—of the bomber herself.



Mathilde ter Heijne, , stills from *Suicide Bomb*, 2000, single-channel DVD, 5 minutes

Ter Heijne's consistent deployment of her own image in another's place signals a refusal to represent the other—to fix the other as an image, in life or in death. In *Solving the Problem*, 2000, a project made around the same time as *Suicide Bomb*, images culled from books and magazines depict violent scenes in which the victim of a political conflict has been cut out, figured through his or her absence. When ter Heijne does depict her subjects, as in the recent project *Women To Go*, 2006-2007, she presents them as anonymous figures and, scrambling the reality of their lives, gives them new biographies. Comprising three hundred and twenty different mass-produced postcards, *Women To Go* shuffles images and life histories, pairing the likenesses of nineteenth-century women with narratives of extraordinary, yet real and emancipated lives. In linking each portrait—each wildly different face, body, and costume—to a name and narrative that did play out on history's stage, ter Heijne seems to ask: Why not these others? Let us imagine that these women, too, accomplished the actions and interventions that history deems worthy of recording. Or, let us imagine the actions with which these women did fill their lives, from the mundane—even

sacrificial—tasks of domestic labor and childrearing to private passions, fulfilled or not. Here, ter Heijne suggests something of the temporal, geographical, and economic unevenness that has characterized the modern women's movement. In their irretrievability, let us keep the anonymous women in mind, tack the postcards to our walls, and uphold their past as potential present.

In ter Heijne's most recent video project, *No Depression in Heaven*, 2006, the storyline of an old-fashioned "women's picture" unfolds in an American Depression-era set that evokes the FSA photography of Walker Evans. Ter Heijne plays both roles: a humble and distraught housewife and a blonde, upper-class woman. Here, it is as if the artist channeled Cindy Sherman, inhabiting the persona of a sharecropper's wife as photographed by Walker Evans and appropriated by Sherman's *Pictures* cohort, Sherrie Levine. The reference to Sherman is apt, for both the humble woman and her dressed-up other are mere cinematic types. Each holds a gun. They follow one another through their respective domestic spaces. They eventually come to face off, like opposite but mirrored images, and fire their guns. This is a scene of class warfare, of mutually ensured destruction—a double suicide of stereotypes. *Oh Death*, the haunting soundtrack to this story, is sung by Sarah Ogan Gunning, the great folk, labor singer of the Kentucky mining country. "Oh Death, O Death," she sings, "please spare me over till another year." Like another mirror image, ter Heijne sings along, quietly, with a slight delay, a slight dissonance. "Oh Death, O Death," she sings, "please spare me over till another year."



Mathilde ter Heijne, , production still from *No Depression in Heaven*, 2006, single-channel DVD, 4:10 minutes

POSTSCRIPT

As I stated in the beginning of this essay, ter Heijne's work is not autobiographical; it is, however, personal. And here the personal is decidedly political, to resuscitate again that old 1970s axiom. Contemporary artistic labor is generally self-sacrificial—despite the apparently still booming art market. Mostly, artists do a lot of work for free. The situation is parallel to the lives of almost all middle and lower class women—at least in the U.S.A. In addition to working "real" jobs, women engage in endless forms of uncompensated labor—caring for their elders, caring for their children's children, shopping, home management, and so on. Ter Heijne's work delves into the psychic and political motivations for self-sacrifice as it is played out on the world's stage. Yet for the woman artist, the sacrifices of day-to-day life are frequently doubled. I offer here a reminder of the self-negating conditions of the lives of so many women artists as yet another way of contextualizing the intimate relationship in ter Heijne's work between art, and women, and self-sacrifice.