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## **Vibeke Tandberg: Aesthetics of Narcissism**

Andrea Rosen, New York, New York

In her previous series of photographs, "Living Together" Vibeke Tandberg montaged together two pictures of herself with the aid of a computer, resulting in a single image depicting what looked like twin siblings interacting. Fundamentally questioning the notion of originality (in its doubling), Tandberg's work also critiqued photography's myth of objectivity (through its carefully meditated composition). Though these issues remain, her newest series, "Line," brings to the fore concerns with the status of the subject. It is in this psychoanalytic register that the five new works at Andrea Rosen mark a decisive shift from an aesthetic of primary narcissism to one of secondary narcissism.

"Line" possesses the same chilly atmosphere that has characterized not only Tandberg's work but also a spate of other photographers of her generation. But unlike her previous pictures, which portray a seemingly enclosed and autonomous world, the new photographs depict a single female (whose features are actually a digitally produced blend of those of Tandberg and her friend Line) staring directly outward. The hermetic spell of her earlier works—of her eating, smoking a cigarette, even of her sleeping with a double of herself—however, is not broken: her eyes never seem to meet ours, deflected as they are by the glossy shield of the photographs' surfaces.

Indeed, although Tandberg's double from "Living Together" might not be immediately apparent, she remains as a specter. The woman in these five works seems less interested in posing for the camera (and thus the beholder) than she is for herself: it is as if she is checking herself out in her bedroom mirror. In line #2, she tries out a look of "innocence," complete with slightly raised eyebrows, while in line #3 the stance is studiously nonchalant, her hands hooked into the back pockets of her pants. The doubled image in "Living Together" is recast here as a private charade between Tandberg and her reflection; through the structural transformation of the camera eye—or, more accurately, the picture plane—into a mirror, the woman, gazing out the frame, only sees an image of herself.

It is this structure of the mirror that brings us to Freud's distinction between primary and secondary narcissism. If the former is characterized by the inability to cathect objects in the world (an instance of this is sleep, when people collapse into themselves), "Living Together" is exemplary: the world melts into the periphery as Tandberg and a double interact in arcadian isolation. Consider living together #12, which depicts two (twin) females as if just interrupted in conversation. Their turn outwards and the tilt of their heads freeze the beholder under a collective, cool gaze:

I am brought back to a moment of adolescent nervousness when the alien language of schoolgirl cliques bore down to question my presence.

In contrast, the "Line" photographs seduce the beholder. The protagonist of line #1 for instance, looks disarmingly outward with a coy, even inviting, smile. Standing in a white camisole and jeans as if having just entered a bedroom, she is flanked by a cracked-open closet to the left and a towel draped over the open door on the right. The domestic casualness of the scene, along with the slightly low angle of the shot, evokes an intimate scene of which the beholder, perhaps, will not just be a witness but a participant: a lover on a bed. It is a seduction laced with danger: the secondary narcissist always will reduce you to a character into a private play, will transform your image, to paraphrase Freud, into an image of him- or herself. In short, this woman might seem to look invitingly out at you, but all she sees is herself, a mirror reflection. In this sense, too, is Tandberg's strategy of inflecting (using digital programming) her friend Line's features with her own entirely appropriate. In a compelling demonstration of technological usage and Conceptual reasoning mutually supporting each other, she literally takes a portrait of an other (Line) and begins to transform it into one of herself.

Tandberg is often cited as participating in a critique of photography's discourse of authenticity; certainly, her use of computer manipulation undermines photography's authority of objectivity. But with this new series of photographs, she begins to explicitly broach the less excavated issue of the status of the subject, introduced crucially if clumsily by Nan Goldin in the '80s. Whether in the guise of primary or secondary narcissism, Tandberg's works have less to do with the subjection to a masculinist symbolic totality in a hyper-mediated world and digital culture than about the tenacious persistence of the subject. It is this strain of photography—best understood within the parameters of Psychoanalysis—which begins to distinguish Tandberg from Feminist legacies of such artists as Louise Lawler, Sherry Levine, and Barbara Kruger. What remains to be seen is whether the ego-laden model of the narcissist is sufficient to propel the discussion in an interesting direction.

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