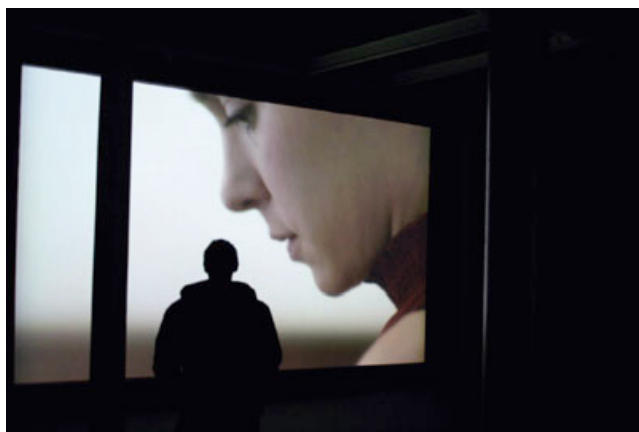


ARTFORUM

1000 WORDS

Miriam Bäckström and Kira Carpelan

TALK ABOUT THEIR RECENT COLLABORATIONS



View of “Miriam Bäckström: *Kira Carpelan*,” 2007, Färgfabriken, Stockholm. Background: Kira Carpelan, *Untitled*, 2006.

ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS tend to be celebrated as win-win situations: Working together, artists expand their strategic arsenals and even, in a sense, their identities. But a more complex dynamic unfolded last year, when Miriam Bäckström decided to collaborate with a younger artist, Kira Carpelan, then in her penultimate year at Stockholm’s Konstfack Art Academy. Bäckström, known since the early 1990s for her photographs of eerily evacuated interiors, has in the past few years increasingly turned to the moving image, working with actor-collaborators to script and shoot videos that expose the often-confounding symbioses of fact and fiction, selfhood and assumed persona. Pushing these interests toward an extreme, Bäckström invited Carpelan to take over Bäckström’s solo show at the Stockholm contemporary art space Färgfabriken. (Bearing in mind the fact that Carpelan had helped edit Bäckström’s 2005 film *The Viewer*, the gesture perhaps most readily recalls Martin Kippenberger’s ambiguous relationships with his many assistants-*cum*-apprentices, e.g., Michael Krebber.) To put the exhibition together, Carpelan was given access to all of Bäckström’s resources—finances, equipment, even diaries—but she had to agree to let Bäckström document the yearlong preparation process on video.

The result was a veritable labyrinth of recursive interconnections: The exhibition “Miriam Bäckström: *Kira Carpelan*,” which opened last February, identifies Bäckström as the artist and Carpelan as her creation; but the work on view—an untitled video starring Bäckström and well-known Swedish actress Rebecka Hemse, who also appeared in *The Viewer*—was made and is owned by Carpelan. Oblique and allusive, the film focuses on two women, Lillith (Hemse) and Rosa (Bäckström), talking to and past each other, seemingly bemused by the slippages of subjectivity and communication.

As for Bäckström, she showed her own video, *Kira Carpelan*, 2007–, as a work in progress last January in the group exhibition “Art of the Possible” at the Lunds Konsthall in Lund, Sweden. In it, we see Bäckström posing Carpelan for a portrait with the meticulous care of a collector looking after her treasure; Bäckström and Hemse delivering a talk on the project; and Carpelan in conversation with “Art of the Possible” curator Anders Kreuger, who seems to be gently egging her on, urging her to make the most of the situation. It is, in a sense, a backstage drama—but instead of the clear narrative arc one associates with the genre, we get an excruciating battle of wills manifest in lukewarm smiles, blank gazes, and wary exchanges. “What can you do for me?” Bäckström asks Carpelan at one point. Carpelan replies, “I can be the image of your

limitations.” In another scene Carpelan tells Bäckström, “You have no vision [for the project].” “I have many intentions,” Bäckström answers. “Can’t you tell me about them?” says Carpelan. “Yes,” says Bäckström, “but you have to ask me first.”

If it’s difficult to tell where each artist ends and the other begins in all this, it’s even harder to identify what they have done together. An apprenticeship? A reality show? Identity theft? An updating of the myth of Pygmalion, with Bäckström in the role of the sculptor and Carpelan playing Galatea, the sculpture that turns out to possess a life of its own? A take on *All About Eve*, on *Persona*—or, as Färgfabriken curator Jan Åman suggests, on the role-playing of Lonelygirl15? —JENNIFER ALLEN



Miriam Bäckström,
Kira Carpelan, 2007–,
unfinished color video.
Production stills.

MIRIAM BÄCKSTRÖM: I did employ Kira to help me cut one of my films, but she has never been my assistant. She has been my artist, my work of art, and my material. I wanted to work with something, or somebody, that I didn’t understand or recognize, and to let this project and person control me, my work, and my exhibition. I knew I’d have to adjust to the will of this person and to the decisions she made. I was interested in living under the pressure of not being able to plan, of not knowing what kind of difficulties Kira would put me in.

KIRA CARPELAN: Miriam said she would function as both a producer and an assistant on the Färgfabriken show. I suggested making a video with Rebecka Hemse and a second actress whom Rebecka would choose, and Rebecka chose Miriam.

MB: When Kira put me in her film, I thought it was a perfect move for the project, and for my own film. I became an image depicting Miriam Bäckström and, possibly, Kira Carpelan.

KC: I received a part-time salary for putting the exhibition together and began working on the production of “my” video. Miriam handled the budget and planning while at the same time functioning as a coach and critic. She also documented the process and arranged scenes for her video *Kira Carpelan*, which was shown as a work in progress at Lunds Konsthall two weeks before the opening at Färgfabriken. In all situations, I tried my best to play the double role of the object and the subject, both taking and giving directions.



**Miriam Bäckström,
Kira Carpelan, 2007–,**
unfinished color video.
Production stills.

MB: Kira never got personal with me; it seemed to be important to her to be professional at all times—or rather, to act professional. She was an art student, a professional art student. But was she playing the role of an art student, improvising the script? I went into this assuming that if you want to work as an artist, you are interested in inventing texts and situations. And Kira was.

In my film, *Kira Carpelan*, the script had to be developed during the project. The only thing we had from the beginning was the structure, the concept, which was to dilute or destroy the preconceived roles we had been working within in our daily lives as artists and as private persons. But at the same time, we had to keep in mind the idea of creating interesting material. This often became a personal conflict, at least for me, about how to act or make decisions—from what perspective?

Sometimes, I decided to use my power to get good material, because we needed a conflict for the film. Kira presented herself as a trainee, and I realized I would have to create the action, since she said no to the possibility of defining herself as the artist, the producer, the inventor, to playing on an “equal” ground with me. Instead she decided only to respond, to react to my actions. So whatever I did, I would look dominant.

KC: I don’t know why Miriam wants to make a docu?mentary. It scares me, really. I would never dare to handle reality. Fiction is what I know. But like I wrote in my catalogue essay for the Färgfabriken show, Miriam “expressed a will to do something provocative or dangerous.” I also wrote: “Many authors start building their characters by giving them a name. This project, I find, is about that. But who is the author? And who is ‘Kira Carpelan’? I have argued that Miriam is the author and I am her material, as in the initial description of the project, which suggested that I would be her work of art. I have also argued that my role is to play the character she will create for me, and that like all fictional characters I will reflect my author and the result will be a portrait of Miriam Bäckström. We have only agreed on the first part.”



**Miriam Bäckström,
Kira Carpelan, 2007–,**
unfinished color video.
Production stills.

MB: The difference between Kira and me is immense, and that was an important ingredient. I’m teaching her, but I’m also using her and being used by her; we are using each other. We could talk about hierarchy and exploitation; why exclude something so interesting? Reality shows resonate with the theoretical and therapeutic aspects of the project; *All About Eve* captures the economic and psychological aspects.

KC: You can't talk about the differences between Miriam and me *without* talking about hierarchy and exploitation. In the context of the art economy, we're not collaborators but competing brands. *All About Eve* is relevant if you believe that an artist's practice equals her network. There are other obvious references too, like Pygmalion. But Pygmalion's role was not within my reach. I couldn't run the show the way Miriam does, because the tools here were relationships, and, obviously, you can't give those away. Rather, I had the idea that I was Miriam's mirror. Though during the project I did have a strong feeling of being in a reality show, like *America's Next Top Model*—except I had no idea what I was expected to perform.

My background is in film and Miriam's is in photography, and when I worked for her editing *The Viewer*, we had a lot of discussions about the differences between moving and still images. Each of us had trouble understanding the other's point of view. But we seemed to share an interest in memory and history, in narrativity, and in issues of representation, particularly filmic representation. My own consideration of these issues is driven by the obvious need, as an artist, to think through the complexities of female subjectivity. Both Miriam and I are the other looking at the other, which makes it a lot more screwed up than if we were men.

MB: An image of a woman is of interest to everybody. The image is a language that's constantly changing. Am I Pygmalion? That would be the familiar version, the most obvious comparison. I had other interests: to create something that goes against you, so that you constantly have to renew your position.

KC: I made an effort not to be Galatea—Pygmalion's Galatea—since that would pretty much only have told us what we already know. Instead I tried to work with that metaphor, going both with and against it to see where there might be an opening for a more nuanced image of objectification. I hope that the video I made can stand alone, but it doesn't stand a chance to do so in the framework of me being Miriam's work. I am interested in both ways of looking at it, which is the reason I didn't go to the opening. My presence would have made the framing story less complex. Maybe in the end, though, the image of me as Galatea will be the strongest one. We'll see.