

G E O R G K A R G L F I N E A R T S

Press release

Clegg & Guttman Modalities of Portraiture

Exhibition duration: 11 December 2015 – 5 March 2016

From the very beginning the art of Clegg & Guttman (both born 1957) has involved “socially communicative processes.”

This aspect of the work became more evident when the work was expanded to include *Social Sculptures* (installations and sculptures that actively draw the recipient into the process) as well as *Spontaneous Operas* (process-oriented events).

Nevertheless their photographic portraits from the early 1980's, are arguably their most significant artistic medium. The single portraits, the photographs of couples, and corporate group portraits belong up to this day to the most important artistic contributions within this genre.

Clegg & Guttman investigate the modalities of portraiture; questions such as how do the commissioned portraits with all their constructed poses, positions, gestures, sceneries and accessories contribute to the construction of the language of power while the generic portraits continue the tradition of the comédie humaine.

In difference to today's pictorial world of photographs taken by mobile devices and the selfie craze, the instant image that is shared in a global community within seconds, Clegg & Guttman staged photography seem to belong to another period.

In fact, portraiture in western art history has always been preoccupied with staging and posing, a result of the necessity for the model of a painting or sculpture, or in early photography, to stand still and pose. Clegg & Guttman's single, double, and group portraits can be viewed within this continuum of an art historical and iconographic succession; a referential field of the aesthetic conventions of historic portraits and group images going back to the 16th and 17th century. They employ references to Dutch, Italian and Spanish painters from Frans Hals to Rembrandt, and from Titian to Caravaggio, from Velasquez to Goya. The result is a work complex that enacts collective structures, social hierarchies, and power relations with the instruments of those historic representational and family portraits that disclose the cultural, economic, and social backgrounds of the photographed person. The allure of their portraits consists precisely in the continuity and at the same time - simultaneous disruptions that occur when the identity of the portrayed cannot be fully assimilated within the tradition of the bourgeois portrait.

The exhibition *Modalities of Portraiture* comprises all usual categories of portraits by the artists – the commissioned single, double and group portrait as well as the generic. All portrayed persons are related through their participation in the contemporary art world, some have been brought up with art; they are gallerists, curators, museum directors or collectors. What is immanent in all these images is a heightened character of staged; a cool, serious aloofness and stark Chiaroscuro contrasts.

Although the portrayed communicate by their glances, gestures, and poses with the viewer, they simultaneously and clearly refer to a place in front of the picture, outside of these dark, discrete interiors, as an inaccessible place of their own. The actions and the social implications are being negotiated intra-pictorially and in relation with each other within the institutionalised framework of the gallery. The portraits both communicate among themselves and reflect on the prevailing institutional background they originate from.

The two libraries of Clegg & Guttman can also be read in this sense – as a form of referential portrait. One private library is mostly being used as family archive, and one public library that evolved over the course of the centuries. The former refers to the genealogy and psychology of an individual and the latter represent the changing power structures and interests in the cultural history of a nation, respectively.

Together with the *Social Sculpture “Cognitive Exercise III, Continuous drawing/Exquisite Corpse,”* a rotating assembly of blackboard cubes – onto which visitors may draw each other in Rodin’s technique of continuous drawing. Collectively the exhibition creates a dense fabric of associations and reflections about the history and modality of one of the most important genres in art history.

What is the relevance of Clegg & Guttman’s portrait photography with its appeal that lies in the enacted and factitious in relation to today’s flood of spontaneous pictures and its inevitable trivialisation of portraiture? What is its significance with regard to the identity of the portrayed? How does the self representation of the portrayed person relates to its external depiction and how this representation manifest itself among the culturally and economically powerful? And which repertoire of poses, gestures, regards, and attributes are being used to visualise the notion of power and hierarchy today? Clegg & Guttman start from the assumption that it is not possible to invent new poses and that “the variables of “quiet” poses are few and virtually everything you come up with is saturated with prior meaning.”¹

This starting point may need to be revised or at least newly reflected on in light of the changing social conditions - the strengthening of the position of women for example and their new consciousness of power that the new portraits vividly reveal. These women have indeed adopted the traditional poses and codes that are apt to visualise power, influence, and status, but have reinterpreted them with their own feminine style and therefore changed the variables of the “quiet” poses and significantly extended the canon. “Every age has to invent portraiture, but it’s really more like reinventing. And that’s pretty easy with photography” noted Michael Clegg and Martin Guttman at the beginning of their career – a statement that has more than come true in reflection of their own portrait tradition of more than 30 years.²

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Opening hours:
Tue – Fri 11am – 7pm
Sat 11am – 4pm

¹ In: *Clegg & Guttman - Portraits de groupes de 1980 à 1989*, CAPC Musée d’art contemporain, Bordeaux, reprinted in: *Clegg & Guttman - Modalities of Portraiture*, jrp/ringier Zurich, 2013, p. 80

² ib., 2013, p. 82