



The Face of All Your Fears, 1999.

On «The Face of All Your Fears»

DIALOGUE BETWEEN ANNÉE OLOFSSON AND INA BLUM

I.B: What was the background for making «The Face of All Your Fears»?

A.O: I suddenly started seeing a lot of people who looked as though they were shaped in a mold – particularly young girls living in certain residential areas of Stockholm. This was not just a matter of dress code, but more particularly their facial features: the differences between them were almost imperceptible. They come from the same type of background and wear the same kind of makeup and hairdo, behave in the same way and share the same opinions. (They are all between 16 and 18 years old.) I approached schools in this area and started by looking through the school yearbooks, then I contacted the chosen girls and photographed them all in the span of one day. I asked them to come without makeup and used a makeup artist who emphasized their likeness even more. The negatives have been developed in an old repro-camera, which produces a black and white image with no grays and a discrete effect of blurring, in order to create an even greater degree of likeness. There was no retouching afterwards.

I.B: I'm interested in the empirical basis for this work, because obviously the tendency to see likeness rather than individuality is the effect of a certain perspective. Strangers or «foreigners» – people with whom we do not immediately identify – all look alike, as if stamped out by a cookie-cutter, whereas those who are close to us seem to defy precise description. Do you think that this particular class of girls are actually more similar than other groups, or were you primarily setting up a relation of distance to them, «othering» them, so to speak?

A.O: Maybe I could have chosen girls from another social background, but I chose this area not only because it contains, in my view, the *most* similar girls but also because of the superior behavior these girls have, coming from the same «posh» background – which gives them a facial expression that is very much the same. Their futures are also more likely to follow the same track because of their similar backgrounds. These girls are more aware of *not* being different...they can't allow themselves to be different. They can't allow themselves even to have friends coming from

another background. And maybe, being adult and no longer one of them, I see «them» much clearer now, and fear it.

I.B: I take this to mean that you yourself did, at some point, belong to this group of girls or identify with them?

A.O: No, not really. Perhaps I wanted to become one of «them» but failed...and when I see them now I know why. One aspect of my interest in them is how a group of such similarly molded people can have such power. Here I would like to give a short description of a game I liked to play: I would select 5 very similar girls and ask them in turn to choose 95 girls from a group 100 girls that I had selected and who were all quite similar to themselves. They would not be given any particular directions for choosing, so they would be likely to choose on the basis of their most immediate visual impressions. Eventually «they» would become part of this larger group, while the 5 others would become leftovers from the group. The question, then, is why this happens, what would make these five different from the first 5...what made them not part of the group? Maybe you could describe to me what you see in this work...you said you were interested in the empirical basis of it?

I.B: When I asked you about the empirical basis of this work, I was concerned with the particular connection between image and «reality» which you seem to set up in this work. You are deploying a certain technique of photographic abstraction which turns actual faces into a sort of logotype. This, of course, is nothing new: In the 70's the black & white, highly contrasted features of Che Guevara were for instance placed in all kinds of likely and unlikely places as the sexy stamp of the «revolution» – any revolution, in fact. Warhol was obviously the first to make this connection between the face of an individual and a logotype – he would take the face of some media celebrity, refine it to just a few significant features, serialize it and distribute it endlessly, so that in the end those faces seemed as designed, as permanent as corporate logos. This was effective, but its argument struck home on a certain level only: one was never in doubt that the logotype face worked

purely on the plane of fiction. Hence all the stories of the «real» Marilyn, the «face behind the mask», broken down and in tears, etc. What you do is different in the sense that you do not serialize the face of one person, but explore the effects of serialism within an actual social formation, the tremendous likeness that we depend on for our sense of community and identity. This is interesting because our discourse on ourselves invariably emphasizes individuality. We fundamentally depend on likeness, yet I think – or feel, on seeing these images – that being exposed to the fact of this likeness scares us. It is uncanny – likeness is uncanny. This is how I interpret «the face of all my fears». Unlike you I am not completely convinced that these girls are actually more alike than other groups – that may, as I said, just be a matter of perspective. What is probably true is the fact of their central position in Swedish society, and it is in view of this that your work seems to have the greatest effect. By picturing their group identity as a sort of uncanny likeness, you make this centrally placed group seem remote, almost foreign. How do you relate to the fact that you expose these girls to what is essentially the mechanism of racism? And how did they react to the effect of your series?

A.O: Because I allowed myself to «pick them out,» I can perhaps understand what you mean by the mechanism of racism in this case. I stereotyped them: I mapped a background for them simply because of their «look» and I categorized them as a uniform group. In a sense I sacrificed them. When I photographed them I gathered them in a big group. They were sitting together waiting their turn. They did not know the title of my work nor my intentions. When I showed the finished work at IASPIS in Stockholm, I invited all of them and their reaction was what I expected: They don't see it the way I see it...they are one and it's ok.