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Synopsis BVA 2013

POWER AND POWERLESSNESS AS EXEMPLIFIED IN CULT BEHAVIOUR

My work explores power and powerlessness with a specific focus upon cult behavior as an example of extreme power relations. Through cults the most intense end of repressive and abusive power relations can be experienced; as such they can help us understand how a person, even a nation might behave while looking for, or believing they have found 'the truth'. My investigations into power and powerlessness explore both social and domestic relationships. My research suggests that both a cult leader and a domestic abuser use similar strategies, which leave their victims powerless. It is through research into Michel Foucault's (1926 – 1984) theories around power and knowledge that I have come to understand the connection between power, discipline, knowledge and the construction of truth.¹

Psychologists, Margaret Singer (1921 – 2003) and Arthur Deikman (1929 -) have informed my research into cult behavior and its psychological implications. Margaret Singer was one of the first psychologists who researched cults and how they operate in society. In an interview I conducted with a former cult member I found many of Singer's assertions confirmed². Arthur Deikman draws startling parallels between cult behavior and culture.³ Deikman and Foucault both claim that we are all subjected to some form of cult behavior through belonging to a culture. Foucault describes culture as 'a hierarchical organization of values, accessible to everybody, but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion.'⁴ And Deikman states that 'Cults are a mirror in which we can see... aspects of the wider culture — the process by which the norms, values, ideas and shared perceptions of a society are passed down from generation to generation.'⁵ Both allude to the fact that society at heart is tribal and we all fall into a spectrum of cult-like behavior within our social network. As a German born immigrant I am acutely aware of behavioral norms in Australia. At the same time my experience as an immigrant has opened my eyes to Germany's rules and regulations which I thought of as universal.

1 Colin Gordon (ed.), *Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge. Selected interviews & other writings 1972-1977*, Vintage Books 1980

2 Interview between author and former cult member HH on 16/8/13. HH left Germany to follow her guru to south Australia in 1989. The group disbanded in 1991 and she has since rebuild her life in Adelaide.

3 Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Source: Texas A&M University website. <http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/choudhury/culture.html> accessed 15/9/13

4 *Michel Foucault Concepts*. <http://www.michel-foucault.com/concepts/> accessed 28/7/13

5 The Human Givens Institute. <http://www.hgi.org.uk/archive/cults.htm#UaKe3uvenpQ> accessed 22/5/13

My photographic work *Honor & Virtue* implies that the figures are totally sense deprived and cut off from the outside world inspired by children playing dress-up. I referenced the African American artist Laylah Ali (1968 -) for this work. In her drawings she depicts power on a mundane, everyday level.⁶ Her figures are often segregated by uniforms, accessorised by belts, masks, or rank-denoting head-dresses which inspired me too look closer at dress as a symbol of power.

Marina Abramovic (1946 -) and Frank Uwe Laysiepen, better known as Ulay (1943 -) have inspired my video work *The Sweet Bread and the Whip (Zuckerbrot und Peitsche)* in which I explore power relations in intimate relationships. I was inspired by the psychological tension as seen in Abramovic & Ulay's early performance work. For this work I also looked at Bill Viola's (1951 -) strategy of extreme slow motion. I would like the viewer to feel that they are able to look at something in detail, which is usually hidden from view.

In my painting *Enlightenment Intensive* I used water colour on wet media acetate to reflect ideas of transcendence, transformation and loss of ego. The material is clear and the image seems to hover in space. Light is able to shine through and around the image and through the material choices I have made I'd like the viewer to get a sense of the figure being totally lost in some ethereal experience.

My research into power and cult behavior provides a trigger for art making and I hope my work lets the viewer experience power and powerlessness through visual, physical means. I work from, and with the figure to deliberately convey a sense of power relations between people and I would like the viewer to imagine themselves in these situations and realise the extent to which power relations permeates our culture and personal relationships.

⁶ Williams College Museum of Art US. <http://wcma.williams.edu/exhibit/laylah-ali-the-greenheads-series-2/> The Greenheads Series' accessed 20/9/13

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