

# Objektiv

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Else Marie Hagen, *Field 1*. 2018.

ELSE MARIE HAGEN

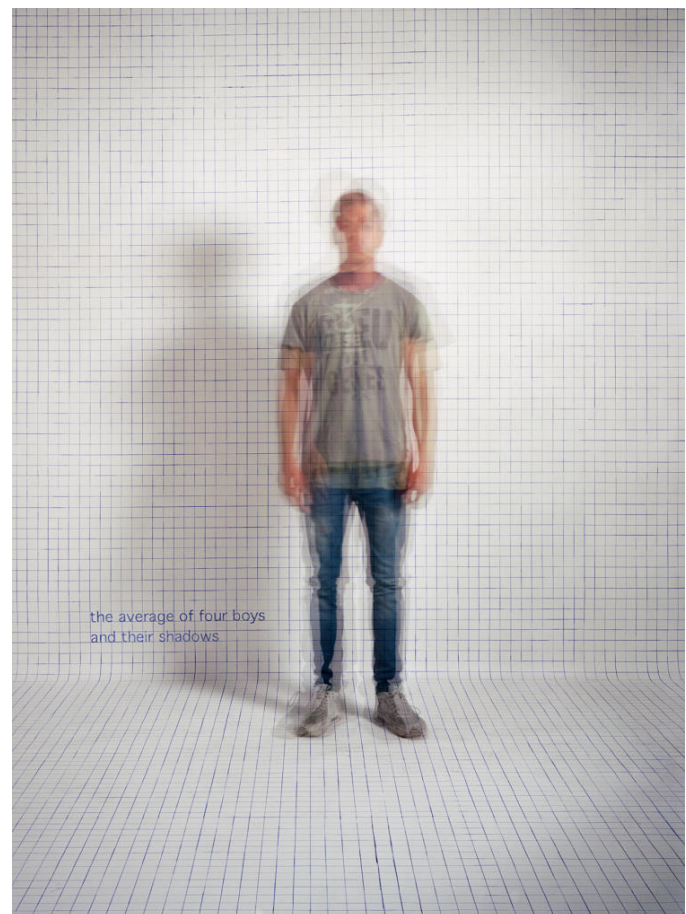
December 3, 2018

**Becoming who you are.**

Else Marie Hagen's latest exhibition at Galleri K in Oslo consists of twenty odd photographs that, as always with her work, delve into questions about photographic representation and its reach far beyond the scope of *art*. Roughly translated as *index of behaviour*, Hagen borrows her title from a questionnaire used to index the behavioural patterns of children and young adults, so as to assess anomalous behaviour. Confronted with Hagen's title, I immediately think of what Gerhard Richter once said, that he does not distrust reality, he distrusts the picture of reality conveyed to him by his senses. Even though many would answer such surveys about the behaviour of oneself or a child with straightforward statements of fact, others will become indecisive and ambivalent, conscious of how far their sensory apparatus is willing to go in order to uphold a basic level of coherence.

At the furthest end of the gallery, through the narrow doorway that leads down the steps to the main room, is a photograph titled *The average of four boys and their shadows*. The boys, photographed in four separate exposures against a hand-drawn grid, is reminiscent of 19th century attempts to merge photographs of several people in order to generate an image of what their potential offspring could look like. I glance down at the list of titles and ask myself, *what* average it is that is being discussed? On my left there are two fairly large photographs with a teenager figuring in each of them.

Their setting is the same but the point of view, the framing and the size sets them apart. The title tells us it is evening, in an unspecified place, the outskirts or hinterland of some kind of suburbia where the young man is searching through the weeds, while the woman looks ahead of her, at the fence that figures in both pictures. *Monkeys* I think to myself when considering their respective poses, the human animal; are we on the inside looking out, or the outside looking in? In another photograph, shot in what



Else Marie Hagen, *The average of four boys and their shadows*. 2018

appears to be a makeshift changing room at a generic institution of some kind, we find *The outfits of four teenagers* as the piece is called strewn across the floor, the table, and hung on hangers on the wall, and next to this, cut-out letters glued to the wall spell out *the outfits of four teenagers, two criminals and two chess players*. Hung straight across the room from this, as a kind of inversion, sheets of paper are hung in what appears to be a studio setting with recognisable forms cut out of them; a t-shirt, pants, a cap and, as cut-out letters yet again tell us, the contents of *his* pockets. The form itself has escaped, leaving us with nothing but the outline from which we must surmise *some things* based solely on assumptions and our own paltry prejudices.

Upon descending the steps into the main gallery, I am face to face with four pictures on the wall to my left. In each one the glass is painted over roughly with an off white layer of paint and two fields are left 'open', so as to reveal underlying objects. The pictures ask us to consider, literally, what holds greater value for us; a hunting knife or a glass of water? A piece of jewellery or a brick?



Else Marie Hagen, installation view.

I turn to my right and am asked to consider what is a given child's full potential, what is her accurate height, and what pray is the standard? Is *your* child a potential chess player, or a criminal? Likes and dislikes are in fact very tricky and complex. However simple the value judgment is, if we like strawberries say, there is

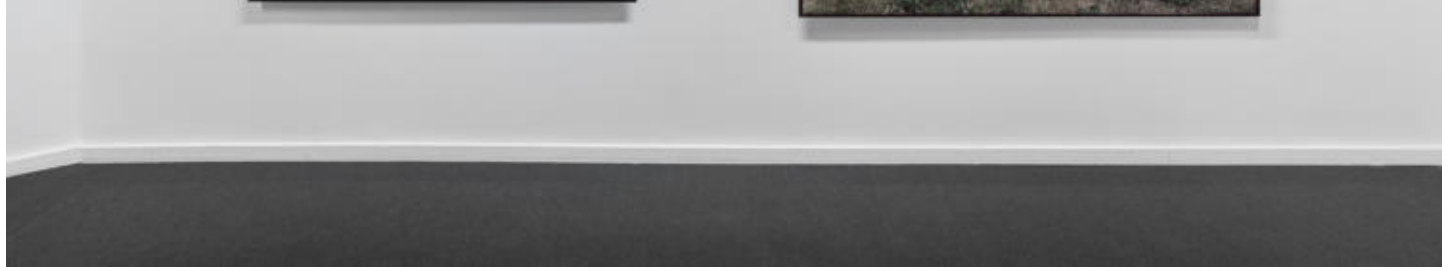


something at stake. I recently read about an experiment on infants at around six months, how a mother's expression of disgust aimed at a certain toy or item of food placed in between her and the child would in turn create a sense of aversion in the child. So who is doing the liking or disliking, or whose smile is that you're smiling? Your own, or your mother's?

Else Marie Hagen's work is always conceptually stringent, but I do not think of it as strict. There is something indelible about the overall mode of her work, and walking through one of her exhibitions requires that one allow for one's expectations to be thwarted. Once you think you've figured out, not just *what* she's questioning, but *how*, you turn a corner or move to the next image and realise that there are no rules of thumb, no overall framework that would allow for a comfortably absolute reading. Operating with such a mode of course makes a lot of sense when the subject is, loosely speaking, questions concerning value judgments, deviation and normalcy, representation and the structures and tools we use to make our world orderly and intelligible.

In terms of means, Hagen is quite economic. Using four or six characters, mirrors, grids, paper cut-outs, clothes, household objects and familiar locales, she is like a writer or composer, combining and recombining these limited resources in order to generate endless variations on, among other things, this strange need we humans have of re-presenting the world in two dimensions. What can we speak of, what can we picture, what can we ask, and when do we need to be silent? Hagen's work invites the spectator to engage, alongside her, in figuring out what the basic questions and assumptions of our thinking, decision-making and overall field of comprehension are. At the risk of belittling the work, there is a kind of mature fumbling at work, an admission that one does not know what the quest is all about, the only certainty is that such a fumbling is important, even vital.





Else Marie Hagen, installation view from the exhibition.

In its infancy, photography was deeply imbued with the positivist notion that if only we could observe the surface of a given thing or situation accurately, its underlying secrets would reveal themselves to us. Fairly short-lived areas of study such as physiognomy and phrenology developed alongside photography, in tandem with more durable one's such as statistics, forensics and symptomatology. With supposedly objective tools at our disposal, it became possible to measure and compare and assign values to any given individual, tracing them alongside anyone whose measurements, personal history and bodily characteristics one had gotten a hold of. One thus had the prerequisites for the scientific study of norms and deviation, arguably the two most important factors in the formation of identity and an integral part of the formation of what came to manifest itself clearly, in the second half of the 1800's as that beacon of normalcy, the *middle class* such as we understand it today.

The most obvious and oft recurring prop, functioning as an underlying structure to many of the photographs in this exhibition, is a grid, that wonderfully infinite space that allows for tracking sameness and difference in behaviour and development over time. In Hagen's work is it used in place of the traditional photographic backdrop running along the ground and up the wall, or as seen through what at first appears to be distorting mirrors such as those encountered at amusement parks, but which on second glance might as well have been a filter put in front of the lens.

Unlike the general public in the Victorian age that was naturally infatuated with photography's ability to create likenesses, Alphonse Bertillon, a French police officer and biometrics researcher, understood that the optics of the camera creates a distortion of any given scene. In order to counter this, he invented a system where a grid was embedded within the scene to be photographed, so that upon later study, one could accurately assess the size and spatial relations within a given crime scene.



In Hagen's work the grid looks to be drawn by hand, already fallible, as if it were slightly unsure of itself. When we add to this the liquid-like distortion that the light has gone through on its way toward capture, the grid is suddenly rendered vulnerable and helpless. As with a border between two countries, a metric ruler or a kilogram, the grid is a symbolic field that is held up by consensus. It is useful for deductive purposes, only when its users agree to certain rules of engagement. When Hagen creates wonderfully messy, playful, densely



Else Marie Hagen, *Repeat after me*, 2018.

layered grids such as in *Repeat after me* and *Maze*, I am put in mind of how few level playing fields we have in 2018. We seem increasingly less and less able to speak according to the same laws or even agree to the same plane of understanding, be it in terms of personal psychology, the climate catastrophe we're up against, regional conflicts and proxy wars, or rogue leaders of state. Partly entrenched within our own systems of belief, we've come in part to resign ourselves to a kind of fate, where the importance of being able to discuss things according to certain universal fields is conceded.

Most of us are traced from birth, a trace that follows us in myriad forms up to the day we draw our last breath, a breath that is most likely recorded on some graph or other. Many are able to heed their own graph, taking little notice of those around them, whilst others, teenagers in particular, fall prey to the often menacing pastime of comparison. Since the grid enables us to see ourselves so easily, in comparison to others, we tend to lose sight of ourselves; we have one graph we follow, and one we wish we would follow, the greener grass on the other side of the axis.

There is nothing wrong with the grid, in fact, it is a democratic space that allows for tracking development and history, but it does seem healthy to be sceptical about how we put the grid to use. Hagen's work seems to me always poised at a place where the limits of the medium coincide or intersect with its inherent possibilities, a space that reminds me of something my shrink says about relationships: that we choose our partners in the intersection of an ideal, and an



unresolved problem.

In a time when photographs are disseminated seamlessly, and instantaneously, everywhere, it is often forgotten that photography is not a language. Photography does not have a steady grammar, but is instead a means of communication that must at every turn reinvent its grammar, evolve and expand on its own idiosyncratic rules. Like us, photography is only able to say anything true or worthwhile at all, when it follows its own internal logic and peculiar graph, when it strives at every turn to become who it is. I turn to Hagen's work and think of her exercises in distorting the grid as liberating attempts at waking us from our limited use of photography. Her work reminds us that the tools we have at our disposal are dependant on how we put them to use rather than taking the fatalistic view that we are wholly subject to them. Even though the grid can be used in the service of all kinds of sinister dealings, one can use it productively in an attempt to understand one's self in relation to one's fellow human beings. Like the grid, photography can throw our image back to us, with as minimal a distortion as possible, enabling us to look upon ourselves with all our faults and merits, realistically and without sentimentality. And then, perhaps, we can see ourselves, or our children, as both criminal and chess player at the same time.





Else Marie Hagen, *The outfits of four teenagers, two criminals and two chess players*, 2018.

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