LIES OR CHEATS. BITES NAILS.

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A pair of boys, observed:

> Two boys fairly swiftly contract the eyelids of their right eyes.

(Where are these boys, exactly? Are they together in the same place, at the same time? And who is watching?)

> In the first boy this is only an involuntary twitch; but the other is winking conspiratorially to an accomplice.

(Who is the accomplice? Might the wink be directed at the person watching? Is it even, perhaps, directed at us?)

> At the lowest or the thinnest level of description the two contractions of the eyelids may be exactly alike. From a cinematograph-film of the two faces there might be no telling which contraction, if either, was a wink, or which, if either, were a mere twitch. Yet there remains the immense but unphotographable difference between a twitch and a wink.

This strange, enigmatic scene – or pair of scenes? – was described by the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle, during a lecture at the University of Saskatchewan in 1968. Ryle was interested in the role of "thin description," that is, in pointing to the irreducible level of basic observation required to interpret any human behaviour: to have any hope of understanding you have to register, to *notice*, the boys' eyelids "fairly swiftly" contract in the first place. (How long exactly does that take, the blink of an eye?) Noticing itself might not be sufficient – to really decode these gestures might require ever-thickening layers of reasoning, to try to decide the exact nature of the "unphotographable difference." But some initial kind of recordable difference, however fleeting or thin, remains absolutely necessary to set that train of inferences in motion.

Ryle's model of understanding behaviour – patiently building hypotheses from a base of thin descriptions – was somewhat leisurely (gentlemanly) and dilettantish. (As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz observed, his examples were less descriptions, thin or otherwise, than "little stories Oxford philosophers like to make up for themselves.") Ryle knew, of course, that modernity had been characterised by many attempts to schematise the recognition of human intentions and traits, from the pseudoscience of physiognomy to the then-recent developments of behaviourism. But since Ryle's time, that trend has accelerated rapidly and, in many fields, first-person observation has increasingly given way to automated processes for parsing data about behaviour. One of the most significant implications of the use of

so-called 'big data' is precisely to displace the need, still felt by Ryle, to investigate the intentions or cause of an action. Instead, we are redirected to 'correlations': patterns and correspondences in data which allow us to draw conclusions – to say that something is the case – without looking for a *why*.

Imagine two data sets, one based on recorded incidents of boys' contracting their right eyelids in classrooms and the other on the same boys' disciplinary records. If the two correlate – for example, if it could be statistically demonstrated that boys who often contracted their right eyelids also had worse disciplinary records – then, as a teacher, I no longer need concern myself with the relatively metaphysical question of whether the boy I am looking at is winking conspiratorially, or simply has a nervous involuntary tic. Either way, all that matters is that the mere act of contracting his eyelid means I should regard him with suspicion: the correlation of the data predicts he will be trouble.

Else Marie Hagen's latest show takes its title from a Norwegian mental health questionnaire for the parents or guardians of children. Part of the form consists of paired statements, which the form-filler should indicate agreement or disagreement with – for example:

> There is little he/she values.
> Soils him/herself.
>
> Lies or cheats.
> Bites nails.
>
> Nightmares at night.
> Is not liked by other children.

Presented like this, as couplets, these abrupt phrases become, as Hagen puts it, "a poetry of suspicion" – haikus of pathology. Why are the statements paired in this way? Are nail biters invariably liars? The form itself is silent. But we can be certain that the data produced by the guardian's numeric responses (0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes the case, 2 = often or very much the case) will be analysed, in the first instance, via a matrix: the answers will result in a score, with different ranges associated with different diagnoses. Like psychometric methods generally, it actively conceals the reason for particular questions and instead tries to ask many versions of the same question, in order to tease out statistically significant correlations in the response. The point is that the most valuable answers are gleaned when the subject does not fully understand the implications of the question. But in that sense, this form is a simply a cruder version of the more subliminal harvesting of personal data which we now all subject ourselves too, every time we open a webpage or linger a little longer over a particular Instagram image. The algorithms do not care about our intentions and they do not want our considered (or even conscious) opinions; they are simply collecting data points based on our behaviour, by which to aggregate us into more useful categories of user – whether to diagnose us or to sell us something.

Many of Hagen's recent images seem to use photographs, paradoxically, to beg the question of "unphotographable difference" – often with young people as their ambiguous protagonists, whether within or beyond the frame. They are images about how we process and interpret images, and about the preconceptions which filter our perceptions of other people. "the average between four boys and their shadows" reads a stencilled text on a gridded studio backdrop, within the shadow(s) of what appears to be several superimposed (probably male) figures. The blue grid itself looks uneven, hand-drawn. The four boys took turns to stand in front of Hagen's lens over the course of several minutes, for a single long-exposure shot. What kind of an 'average' is this? What kind of a data set might these four boys comprise?

Another image. A set of discarded clothes, both hanging and in piles, sits beside a slogan on the wall: "THE OUTFITS OF FOUR TEENAGERS: TWO CRIMINALS AND TWO CHESS PLAYERS." Which clothes belong to whom? This statement is a kind of logical trap which Hagen has set for us within the image, tempting us to imagine these four teenagers as falling into two distinct sets: criminals and chess players. But the conjunction, 'AND', is deceptive – one or both of the criminals might also be a chess player. And what is the symmetry between the two categories in the first place? If "CRIMINAL" seems clearly pejorative, rather than merely descriptive, doesn't "CHESS PLAYER" sound like an extra curricular

boast on a school C.V.? "TRUE VERSION" declares the image, in a final textual element – the letters apparently cut-out and standing on the floor in the bottom right corner – but the phrase simply exposes us to further doubts (do other versions exist? what would it mean for them to be false?).

In fact, a metaphorical chess player makes an appearance in Ryle's lecture too, with perhaps some similar connotations but much less self-awareness than in Hagen's usage. At one point, during the process of trying to imagine the behaviour and appearance of someone thinking deeply, Ryle pictures, a "young chess-player… trying to think out his next move, or his next three moves, when he is physically waving his knight some two inches above the alternative squares into which it might go." Then he makes an odd comparison:

> He is somewhat like the housewife… who might try to plan the floral decoration of her dining-room by shifting and re-shifting vases and bowls to alternative positions in the room, and by shifting and re-shifting flowers, leaves and branches to alternative vases and bowls.

Now we seem to be entering the thinnest of descriptions, the palest of stereotypes – some big data about chess-playing housewives would almost come as a relief.

Hagen is interested in precisely these kinds of conceptual short circuits, by which thought is led into pre-prescribed silos. In another series of collages, the glass in the frame has been painted white but in such a way as to leave some gaps. In each image these gaps comprise both a pair of phrases, negative stencils as it were – variations of "more important than this" and "less important than that" – and, alongside each phrase, an irregular section of a photograph. The photographs are all of objects which don't necessarily seem comparable (a mouth and a book; a bayonet and a glass of water). Like the strange pairings in the questionnaire, the pairs of phrases/images seem to be invoking a ranking system which remains opaque, and trying to elicit some third term which they won't name.

If some of these images seem to suggest a kind of politics, or at least a pointed scepticism, they nonetheless speak in the language of questions. If it insists on anything, Hagen's work insists on hesitation – above all, about the desire or demand for photographs to have a content. Instead, her images want to extend the photograph's quality of "thin description" and to preserve us in the space of doubt as to what, exactly, is being described. It is not that they aspire to escape the process of denoting or meaning, but simply that they want to draw it out, in time, and to draw us in, as accomplices to its construction. That is the quality which connects these images, which incorporate fragments of statements and sometimes of people, with seemingly very different photographs involving painterly abstractions. In *Shapes That Might Be Real*, for example, some of Hagen's circular abstract paintings are captured in a long exposure as they are moved through space, animating them. Now it is no longer clear where the boundary is between the photograph and its subject: is it a depiction of a painted object, or are the paintings just props to be used to generate the photograph?

It is hard to preserve this openness to things, to pause. It involves a very active suspension of usual ways of comprehending the world, a kind of wilful ingenuousness. At the very end of his lecture, Ryle moves from the anonymous boys' eyes to a deliberately much more loaded example – a political leader signing his name:

> A statesman signing his surname to a peace-treaty is doing much more than inscribe the seven letters of his surname, but he is not doing many or any more things. He is bringing a war to a close by inscribing the seven letters of his surname.

To insist that we keep in view the literal fact of the writing of those seven letters (which is the only thing the statesman actually does, even if it ultimately means "much more") – that we stop to consider the *seven letters* he needs to spell his name – might seem somewhat absurd in this context. But I have a feeling that here, at least, Hagen might agree. In her work, description is perhaps less thin than endless, an invitation to ask what an adequate description, a "true version," of a teenage boy or a painting could even look like. And that open-endedness, that non-rhetorical questioning quality, is why even serious subjects take on a surprising lightness in these works – a kind of halo from Hagen's boundless curiosity.