

(Com)prehending
the other, or
“The portrait”
Judith Souriau

In Jirí Skála's piece, *Exchange of Handwriting* (2006-2011), a man and a woman exchange samples of their writing. Then, while sitting back-to-back for an entire day in an exhibition space, they attempt to imitate each other's handwriting. We bear witness to a mutual apprenticeship, as each of them endeavors to appropriate the style of the other. It is people (the two performers) and their actions that are on exhibit here, the piece functioning both as a performance and as a kind of enforcement of protocol.

The participants begin each morning with one page of the other's writing, and then spend the day doing their best to get as close as they can to making that writing their own. Their workday begins and ends with the opening hours of the museum or gallery. It's a troubling work because we don't immediately know where it resides: Is it the presence of the performers that makes the piece? Is it the act of imitation? The writing? Or is it the final result? In any case, it is a *process* that is shown, and I would say in this case that the action is what's acting on us. Depending on what time of day you visit the show, you will find the exercise in varying states of completion, with the participants *absorbing* each other, and mastering the other's writing style, to a greater or lesser degree.

So why analyze the work of Jiri Skála here, in a book about the work of Markus Hansen?

When I first showed Markus Hansen's series, *Other people's feelings are also my own*, in 2007 at the Ventiló Galerie in Brussels, I did not yet know Jiri Skála's *Exchange of Handwriting*. It was only some years later, after doing some research on "the action depicted" in contemporary art¹ that the link became clear to me. *Exchange of handwriting* and *Other people's feelings are also my own* are two acts of imitation. In each one, a symbolic appropriation of the other, and of what constitutes the other – their penmanship, or their facial expression – is in play. Markus, like Jiri Skála, speculates that another person might be able to capture (or at least try to capture) that about us which is the most ours, the most personal. Like Jiri Skála, in *Exchange of Handwriting*, he suggests a partial transposition of identity – as troubling as that transposition might be.

1. Judith Souriau, *Exposer le vivant. Performance et action dans l'art actuel*, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2012 (à paraître)



Installation view of Jiri Skala as part of the exhibition *The Other tradition* at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2011. Image by The White Project.

But the difference in *Other people's feelings...* is that Markus Hansen pointedly denies us the process, the witnessing of the apprenticeship upon which Skála's piece depends. It is, nonetheless, a work long in process, as evidenced by its date: 2001-2014. But in Markus's case, the work resides in the completed act, and in his photographic capture: an image in which we are a little stunned to notice how much Markus actually resembles his model. The picture serves as the evidence of the work. The trials and errors that Markus has gone through to get there remain hidden from us, and so much the better. It's left for us to imagine his approach: from observation, to rehearsal, to mimicry, the succession of attempts to arrive at this or that expression, or to take on a particular air. To metaphorically become the other, for the duration of a snapshot; and for this you have to read him, to grasp him,

to *comprehend* him— take him with you, etymologically. I like to imagine the efforts Markus made in stockpiling these expressions; all his fumbblings and gropings, the full repertoire of attitudes he amassed in himself. Did a certain ease of access start to settle in, slowly but surely, after five, ten, or fifteen portraits? Or, on the contrary, did the process begin all over again each time at zero, full of challenge and mystery? Did Markus ever say to himself, "This time I won't be able to do it."?

After I learned that I am a twin myself, Markus confided in me his fantasy of having a double. And this whole series no doubt grows on some level out of that childlike dream of having a twin. In fact, the motifs of the mirror, the double, and repetition recur often in Markus's various works, across a broad spectrum of media.

Is it always about finding the missing other half of himself, as in Plato's myth of the Androgynes? Beyond performance, and beyond photography, Jiri Skála's *Exchange of Handwriting* and Markus Hansen's *Other People's Feelings...* both elevate the centuries-old pictorial theme that is the portrait. It's a work that is about the other - their identity, their make-up - but also about how much of that the artist manages to take with him (to comprehend).