

Avedon – BLIXEN – Capote: A Question of Style

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So speaketh the Arbiter of the masquerade: "By thy mask I shall know thee". (Blixen: The Deluge at Norderney).

'As a storyteller I shall know thee.' Thus spoke Richard Avedon – with his Blixen photos.

Karen Blixen is often mentioned in relation to concepts of performative biographism, biographical irreversibility, literature in the media age, as well as business expressions such as "personal branding", "storytelling", "image care" etc. She has been praised as a pioneer, a female role model, a superstar – an author who could successfully control her image.

If one should mention a scratch in the veneer of the incarnate storyteller, it is due to the American photographer Richard Avedon, whose works were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, Louisiana, in Denmark, in the autumn of 2007. Among them, several photos of Karen Blixen.

Blixen was shocked, when she saw herself 'exposed' by Avedon.



It was Truman Capote, a good friend of Blixen, who sent Avedon to Denmark to involve the famous Danish writer in their joint project *Observations: Avedon's photo book with text by Capote*, which appeared in the autumn of 1959.

"Your photos of, and Truman's essay about me made me sad. [...] For I feel that I am meeting here two people entirely without generosity," Blixen writes in a telegram to Avedon.

However, what Avedon does is what he always does: he sees through the figure who is his model. For him Blixen is the storyteller. A figure of power. A face with an ambiguous, indeterminate expression. Shaping, creating hands. His work of art is at once respectful and revealing. He demonstrates Blixen's obsession with her own role. And perhaps it is this revelation that agitates her.

In my *paper* I present an interpretation of Blixen's impetuous reaction. I refer partly to Avedon's and Capote's explicit intentions with photos and text, and their artistic style in general, partly to Blixen's self-promotion as a storyteller. Here I refer to works of art representing the Pygmalion myth, a myth that focuses on the problematic relationship between the artist and his work.

My *paper* is based on research I did for the Avedon exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, Louisiana in the autumn of 2007. The exhibition continued to Milan, Berlin, Amsterdam and San Francisco.