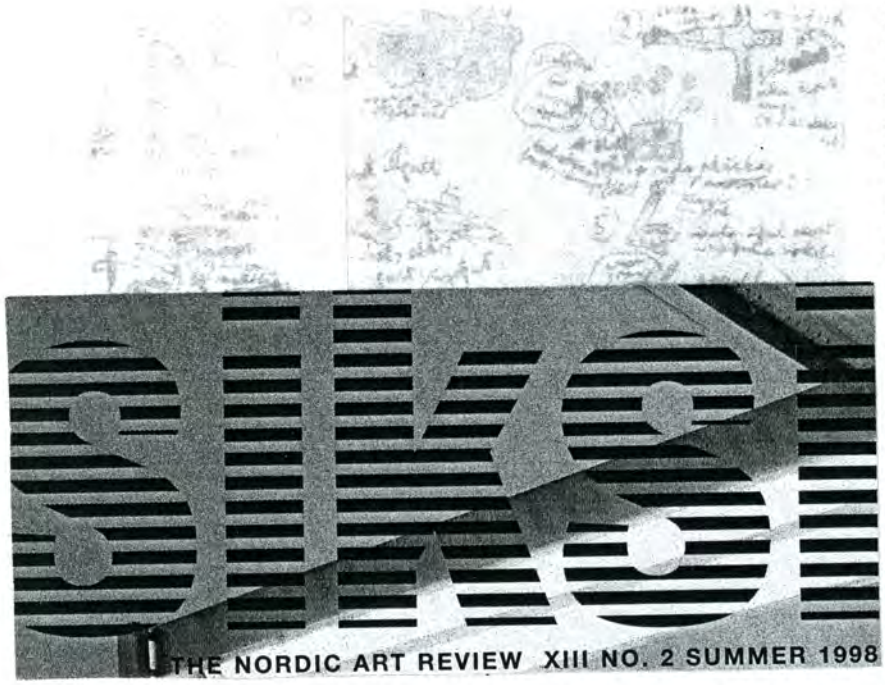

Susanna Pettersson on killing time

Sam Taylor-Wood, **Louisiana** Museum of Modern Art

History constitutes the common story of humanity. The present moment and the everyday situation to which this gives rise create a sense of security. The British artist Sam Taylor-Wood adds a dash of conflict to this arrangement, mixing the different levels together in a way that makes them difficult to dismantle again into individual pieces. Her works look and feel familiar, but energy bursts from them in a strangely intriguing manner.

In her early works, Taylor-Wood used her own body as building material for images. These works were associated with role-plays in which she commented on something that had already been done (e.g. the variant of Yoko Ono and John Lennon's double portrait *26th October 1993*). Some of her other self-portrait works are part of a family of images in which the documentary character of performance pictures is combined with a deliberate arrangedness (*Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank*, 1993). Later on, Taylor-Wood herself slipped into the background of her pictures, away from the focus of the directed, staged episodes.

The works shown at Louisiana represented this role of behind-the-camera orchestration. This was also the case at the companion exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich in November and December of last year.

The Louisiana exhibition formed an accomplished, measured whole; like a well-written essay. Three videoworks and five photographs subtly brought out the trenchant theatricality of Taylor-Wood's visual reality, whether this was in almost absurd scenes, as in the *Five Revolutionary Seconds* series (1995–97), the minimalist everyday events in *Atlantic* (1997), or an amalgamation of the everyday and the absurd, as in *Killing Time* (1994) and *Sustaining the Crisis* (1997).

The modes of expression used in Taylor-Wood's still-life-like photographic panorama shots and video installations began to overlap: the visibility or invisibility of the physical movement in the picture had, in fact, lost its significance. The greatest movement occurred in the way the mental image generated by the work lived on in the viewer, with the events advancing as forcefully as long-pent-up water rushing along some dry riverbed. Thus, the individual photograph events in the 360-degree interior panoramas and scenes from tightly cropped videoworks could be interchanged or contain each other: the couple thrashing out their relationship in Atlantic could equally well appear as part of the nocturnal drama of the photograph, or the unwell man in the photograph could be vomiting in the corner of the restaurant that is the setting for Atlantic.

Taylor-Wood is good at illustrating scenes with living individuals, perhaps because she senses the potentials of being in the picture through her own body. The unflinching instrumentalization of people gives the works a cold feel and an alienating effect, even though, in truth, the full range of emotions from love to raving madness boils beneath the surface.

For example, in Killing Time, Taylor-Wood has brought together four bored people and opera music. They mechanically mouth the words of the bombastic libretto in the background, but their thoughts are elsewhere. Viewers of Killing Time confront the stratified nature of exis-

Sam Taylor Wood, *Atlantic*, 1997, still from a three-screen laser-disc projection.

tence, the change that takes place with time, the yawns and the frustration that trace the outer contours of the pictured individual's nature—what they want to display and what they would prefer to keep hidden. The more time we spend with this work, the more we become immersed in it. Killing Time could also be an example of a new application for traditional portrait painting.

The structure of several of Taylor-Wood's works is as much of a cornucopia as the marketplace pictures painted by Pieter Bruegel, but the stories portrayed are not as obvious. Beneath the grand umbrella-narrative, several disconnected things are occurring. The eye can pick out any detail and push on from that into the work. The mind intuitively strives to interweave the different scenes, as though to fill in the unseen speech and thought bubbles with its own musings. This is given especial emphasis in the Five Revolutionary Seconds series, which can be seen as a kind of refinement of genre painting and film stills.

The settings for Taylor-Wood's works are so recognisable that they could be happening next door or in a local pub. The works are stratified pictorial events that rely on directness and the unashamed recycling of shared visual imagery. At root, they speak about human loneliness, isolation, longing for contact, and the conflicts that result. In an instant, quivering sensitivity and openness give way to a hard, impenetrable surface, to ground that people instinctively defend. Taylor-Wood treads this ambivalent boundary line in the human mind, and uses her camera to make it visible, by the means of forthrightness and theatricality.

Susanna Pettersson