

Sharon Kivland: *Mes Fils*

In the large upstairs room of domobaal gallery Sharon Kivland has displayed an ongoing series of photographs. In each of the circular images a woman is shown kissing a younger man. At first sight the embrace appears filmic, as if taken from the closing scene of a classic Hollywood movie. Although the embrace is repeated nine times and formally reminiscent of countless representations of kissing couples, *Mes Fils* does not speak of the clichéd filmic kiss, the iconic pose made famous by Rodin or the spontaneous romantic gesture. Unlike these familiar representations, Kivland's many embraces do not seek to portray an idealised image of love. For a start, each of the young men are different and the women, who remains the same, is old enough to be their mother.

Looking at these images one senses that it is the end of the relationship rather than the beginning. Perhaps like the parents that proudly display the graduation photos of their children on the mantelpiece, Kivland's photographs mark a point of departure. However, while the children move on to experience new things the parents often remain in the same place. It is, then, this same place that Kivland finds herself, playing out the same role only to bid farewell to her many sons. Although Kivland's ex-students stand in for the complex relation between mother and son they are also, at the same time, her sons. It is as if with each kiss Kivland gives a part of herself (there is no doubt that while the young men remain roughly the same age the women does not). But even if this exchange appears to benefit the son and not the mother – who at the end of it all is expected to repeat the process – we should remember that the gift is always something of a burden to the recipient.

The gift of love, more than any gift, must be reciprocated. The gift of the mother's love is both the most selfless of gifts and the most binding. As Marcel Mauss has pointed out, the gift is a form of exchange: objects, animals and even human relationships form a perpetual cycle of gift exchange. This bond serves as an agreement: the gift must always be returned. In this way we must acknowledge the impossibility of the gift, that is, we must recognise that the gift can never operate outside the circle of exchange. When seen in this light, *Mes Fils* reminds us of the way human relations can reflect what Marx understood as the invisible and phantasmagorical commodity-form. The things that we acquire throughout our lives, be it love or material wealth, form an invisible debt. We are, as Jacques Derrida has said, 'living in a state of debt'.

While the relation is never truly broken, Kivland's series of exchanges mark the end rather than the beginning of the cycle. The students return to repay their debt, they return to give something back to their tutor and, perhaps more specifically, they return to add something to Kivland's practice. It is as if she has called in the debt and, like all good sons, these young men repay that which remains outstanding. The repetition of this continuing economy tells us something about the nature of social relations. We see the kiss repeated again and again, we are told that the series is ongoing. The cycle has acquired a logic of its own. *Mes Fils* stages the moment where social, economic and material relations collapse. More than anything, the kiss, which is normally associated with a spontaneous gesture: 'it started with a kiss' comes to represent the way our lives are governed by systems of exchange. In spite of this mechanical display of affection there remains some emotion, look closely and you will see the odd hot flush.

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