

The London Consortium
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Commentary on “Traces of an Imaginary Affair” by Björn Franke

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Björn Franke's "Traces of an Imaginary Affair" is a project that explores the deliberate provocation of jealousy within relationships. The work consists of a series of photographs that illustrate a kit of devices designed to create the traces of an imaginary affair. We are confronted with the devices but also with the results of their application – the marks on the user's skin that mimic bites, bruises and carpet-burns. The kit enables jealousy to be aroused in the user's real lover – through the creation of traces left by an imaginary one. The jealousy that the user wishes to arouse will operate as envy of the imaginary lover and will provoke a fear of the loss of the love-object, thereby confirming the feelings that the real lover has for the user.

Perhaps the user seeks not to arouse jealousy in itself, but to provoke the desire of the beloved. The user demands a reciprocation of their desire, but the beloved does not return their gaze: "When in love, I solicit a look" says Lacan, yet "what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that – You never look at me from the place from which I see you." The use of this kit promises an impossible solution – that through the marks left by another's desire for me, the beloved will enter this space that I occupy. The beloved will respond not only with desire for the imaginary lover's object of desire (the user), but will seek to possess the desire of the other's desire for that object. The marks created through the jealousy kit are not only manifestations of the traces of an imaginary lover but also the expression of the user's need to create jealousy: a neurosis which mediates itself as a scar.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud considers the skin to be the "erotogenic zone par excellence." Skin performs an erotogenic role; it is the surface of desire itself and the surface through which we communicate it. In Franke's photographs the skin functions as a canvas for the creation of a simulacrum of desire – for "false copies" of the residues of an affair. The kit creates the touch of the "lover" that demands the sight of the beloved. There is a paradox here – for jealousy is always concerned with what can never be seen. For Derrida "pure sight relieves all jealousy" and "jealousy always has to do with some trace, never with perception."

The skin is the fabric of the body onto which injuries bleed psychologically, as well as physically. Levinas calls the skin "a surface of exposure, zone of susceptibility, of vulnerability, of pain and abuse." These traces of the imaginary lover are also self-inflicted scars and the kit used to create them resonates with the kits used by those who self-harm. Self-harm is sometimes prompted by a feeling of depersonalisation. In Franke's work there is an aesthetic depersonalisation – the subjects are presented in what appears to be an anonymous hotel room, they are dressed in a uniform of black and white and their faces are often cut off from their bodies. Yet the inevitable comparison with images of real self-harm consigns these photographs to the realm of pure simulacra, they can only fail in comparison and reinforce their own falsity.

In contrast, Lauren Shear's documentation of actual self-harm (www.laurenshear.com/photo/self-harm) provokes an exploration of real choice and suffering. In "Traces of an Imaginary Affair" the traces operate as a chain of imaginary signifiers – of a trace that has no origin, of a signifier that has no sign, of a symptom that has no patient. This project exists purely in the realm of the imaginary, but the photographs themselves do not convince us that the devices have really been used: the credit for "make-up" in the project compounds the possibility that the marks have been artificially created. This failure to convince the viewer of the photographs that the marks are real imaginary traces ultimately provokes questions about the status of the work. The photographs are not the work itself, but neither do they exist as documentation: "Traces of an Imaginary Affair" is not performance art but design (it is, we should point out, a project by a student of Product Design). The photographs are merely supplements to the project; the devices are always in the foreground and there is always an emphasis on the product. Ultimately the photographs of the enactment do not transcend the wish to illustrate the product; the project always becomes subsumed by this desire – it becomes illustration rather than exploration.