



From Interspaces and Broken Metaphors
A View of the Swedish Art of the Eighties

• SÖREN ENGBLOM

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The Spacious Eighties

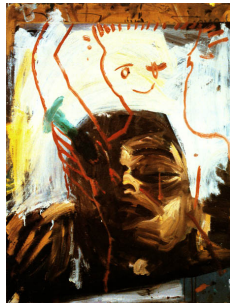


This text treats «the eighties». «The eighties» do not exist yet. But with every text on «the eighties» that is brought to fruition, a bit is added to the map. Something worthwhile in itself. My ambition is not to paint the complete picture. A decade or so hence, the eighties will not present a uniform pattern - one that will be valid for everything and everybody. «Fashionable expressions have been bandied about but have never been linked together into a comprehensive theory or ideology».¹

In point of fact, this type of reasoning is, in itself, typical of the eighties. This text treats but one of «the eighties» which took place between 1980 and 1990; one of many.

There was a great deal of art and artistic expression in the 1980s in Sweden. The decade is preceded by a period of narrow aesthetic debate and is accompanied by intensive reasoning and interpretation. External factors such as the economic boom were almost certainly influential. But in the early days one elementary factor sufficed: that art was, once again, desirable.

But where do the eighties begin?



For myself I remember the literary critic Mats Gellerfelt's critique of contemporary Swedish prose published in Jacobs Stege in 1978 as a turning point. It was followed up in Expressen under the headline «It's Art I want to discuss».²

Many consider «the wild Germans» in the Berlin exhibition «Gefühl und Härte» shown at Stockholm's Kulturhus in the spring of 1982 as the real thaw, and the question of rehabilitating painting was also raised by the exhibition «Der Hund Stösst in Laufe der Woche zu mir» (Im-mendorf, Kirkeby, Lüpertz, Penck) at Stockholm's Moderna Museet the year before. And even an exhibition such as «()» - Rehnberg, Scott, Wroblewski - at Thielska Galleriet in 1978 showed, in all its quietness, that something had happened.

But the paradigmatic shift itself comes with minimalism, pop art and new realism in the early sixties. This was manifested in Sweden by the pioneering exhibitions «Rörelse i konsten» (Movement in Art), «4 Amerikanare» (4 Americans) (Johns, Leslie, Rauschenberg and Stankiewicz), «Pollock» and «Amerikansk Pop-konst» (American Pop-art) at Moderna Museet in the early sixties. The internationalization that was thereby introduced came to an abrupt halt in 1968. The art periodical Paletten changed ideology between issues, from an exhaustive presentation of American minimalism and conceptual art (radical cultural movements in the USA!), to «sudden propaganda, «actions» and demagogic populism».³

With its open attitude to the world and to international art, one can argue that the eighties in Sweden took over where the sixties ended. Which is not to ignore the fact that a great deal of art and ideas from the seventies are fundamental to the art of the eighties. Influences that reach us in roundabout ways. It should be remembered, for example, that Joseph Beuys had his first exhibition outside Germany at Moderna Museet in 1971, where J.O. Mallander also

produced «A Head Museum for the Eighties» on conceptual art in 1974, and that «On Kaware» was shown in 1980.

One of the importers has been Jan Håfström. His contacts with the USA, particularly with Gordon Matta-Clark (died 1988), and the contemporaneous interest in «alternative spaces» in New York led to his work at PS1 - the former school in the Queens district of Long Island, where unconventional exhibitions and guest studios exist under the same roof. PS1 was originally run by «The Institute for Art and Urban Resources». The name is instructive. Throughout the eighties, a continuing grant made it possible for young Swedish artists to work there.

In his search for «alternative spaces» in Stockholm, Jan Håfström, together with Håkan Rehnberg, Johan Scott and others “discovered” an abandoned linseedoil factory on the Danviken industrial estate. A total of nine artists collaborated under the brief heading «ibid.» (from Latin *ibidem*; in the same place). This collective installation was followed up a year later in the empty München brewery and the year after that, in an old, abandoned dye factory in Borås. The “ibid.” exhibitions are significant landmarks of the early eighties. Probably discussed more than viewed, they are typical of a rather obscure, somewhat shy and above all, very quiet tendency in eighties art. Others have been visually more prominent, particularly at the beginning of the eighties - and towards the end.

But before we go further we must issue a general «influence warning». Swedish art has always shown considerable sluggishness in relation to outside influences. Not that it has rejected such influences - rather the contrary. But the native cultural inheritance always seems to meet influences with a particular opposition. The result is a mixture containing highly provincial ingredients. Perhaps these are the only common elements of a Swedish «style». It is popular to chide the Swedes for being slow. But why not see this as a virtue?

«Our Swedish culture is, at bottom, a court culture and Gustavus III was by far the most influential cultural policymaker of all time», claimed Thomas Henrikson with a reference to Esaias Tegnér’s famous poem on the fiftieth anniversary of the Swedish Academy on April 5, 1836; in which Gustavus III and the Swedish Academy, which he founded, are given the honour for allowing the barbaric fosterland to meet foreign magnificence. «It was through this meeting that what is genuinely Swedish arose».⁴

It is against this background that we should consider, for example, the results of Swedish painters’ visits to Grez a hundred years ago; «the men of 1909» in Matisse’s school, the Halmstad group’s surrealism, the very particular Swedish concretism with its «unorthodox» interest in nature, and Swedish informalists like Rune Jansson and Eddie Figge. Common to them all is a curiosity about what can be found in a particular place abroad combined with a fidelity to their own experiences and the Swedish tradition by means of which the impression of a «pale copy» is dissolved. Something specific is created instead. It is proper to stress this before looking back at the eighties which have just rounded the corner. The foreign influences were not just “absorbed” this time either.

But the eighties have meant closer collaboration within the Nordic countries. The creation of Nordiskt Konstcentrum (Nordic Art Centre) situated on the island of Sveaborg outside Helsinki and the recurring Nordic exhibitions Borealis and Aurora have made both similarities and differences apparent in a

new and often striking manner. The fierce conflicts of the seventies between social realism and concretism in Helsinki, between a highly expert craft and a style very conscious of art history and political propaganda in Stockholm, etc., have been replaced by interchanges across geographic, national and aesthetic boundaries. The most noticeable difference between the countries is the much higher degree of theoretical consciousness evidenced at the Academy of Art in Copenhagen.

But I dare to maintain that the eighties in Nordic art have been a feast for the eye!

The City



Ola Billgren: Romantic landscape II, from the litografic suite by the same name, 1981-83.

Nowadays one approaches the Pantheon in Rome across a slightly sloping square. In antiquity, one wandered upwards to the temple of all gods. Two thousand years of building have raised the street level by several metres. In Rome city lies upon city. Wherever one digs one comes upon what history has left behind. It is impossible to delude oneself here about being first. Everything is city. Everything is the work of human hands through the ages. The city has become a second landscape. Every building is a text that is written upon an existing text. And while an intrusion in the countryside can be restored by organic healing, an intrusion in the city is healed by somebody building over it, eager to make their mark with a new building. All is construction. Yet, in the long run, one finds no traces of any particular person. Everything flows.

It is easy to see similarities between language and city. As soon as one forms a word in one's mouth, one tastes the meanings that it has accrued. But since the meanings are many, the history of the work is as much a condition of understanding as of misunderstanding. Speaking is like writing over the previous meanings. It is specifically in the city that jargon, slang and technical language are generated with particular speed. In the city there is a drastic, double - superscription.

There are traces everywhere of something already made; ready made. The use of existing objects as artistic material is no more strange than using existing words when speaking. The city was not only the arena for the art of the eighties. Often enough it was - like language - a model for the artistic endeavour.

All of this is played out against the backdrop of social trends. The green wave of the seventies was exchanged in the eighties for a black, or possibly grey one. An asphalt wave. If the seventies proceeded on a bicycle or in a Volkswagen van and saw the farm as the ideal dwelling place, the eighties - at least in the media - travelled by Porsche and instead of the farm saw the city as it's surface, facade or arena. But the intellectuals walked, took the train or rode the subway.¹ The city wanderer returned. And with him (since this is a male figure): «Not for years has so much status been attached to being a young man as in the eighties, a really young man that is»² - a feeling of "fin de siècle" or of the twenties. Or even of the fifties since it again became possible to sit in cafés. Not surprisingly, the city wanderer has a volume of Baudelaire, or preferably Walter Benjamin, in his coat pocket. The fact that the two writers contradict each other on many points is of less significance. The urban landscape is bigger than any

petty divisions. The city swallows all experience and reurgitates in the form of spectres. If one is looking for a threat that the artists of the eighties have sought to allay it is precisely such spectres; that which has already been created. The reproduction in a copy (or more commonly, in a different form) can reflect a fascination with something, but has nothing to do with adoration; rather it is like the process of demagnetization - deconstruction.

In one of the decade's central texts, «Ars et urbs»³ Mario Perniola deals with art and rites in ancient Rome. Legend relates that the second king, Numa Pompilius, received a shield (ancile) from the gods. It fell from the heavens into his hands and he was worried lest the enemy should take it from him. Instead of hiding it he engaged Mamurius Veturius, the first artist to be mentioned in Rome's history, to produce eleven copies of the shield that were so exact that it would be impossible to distinguish them from the original which thus, in principle, was destroyed. «Mamurius Veturius», Perniola writes, «is the originator of the first act of simulation». The intention was twofold: Numa avoided the plots of the enemy and he made the betrayal meaningless. «For if the true one cannot be distinguished (asèmos) from the false, the betrayal will lack its necessary condition... The act of simulation knows no secrets and has no treasures to guard.»

Perniola describes the city of Rome as a place without a proper origin; it merely has a beginning. In Rome everyone is an immigrant, from Etruscans to Greeks. «From the very beginning Rome is a simulated city, which cannot be distinguished from a real city.» The parallel with the New York of today is obvious. Or why not with a suburb of Stockholm like Vällingby.⁴

Perniola distinguishes between the Greek «polis» and the Latin «urbs» by claiming that the Greek city has links with an ancient settlement and that it means a city state, its particular genius being found in a «city divinity». The Latin «urbs», on the other hand, signifies a «principle for the organization of space». And while the Greek «polis» was culturally separated from the surrounding countryside, the «urbs-formation» sought to create a world city. Hence urbanization - the city's mentality and conditions are spread throughout the entire country.

Rites in Greek society originated with and had unbroken links to myth, while rites in Rome were simulatory. «Compared with the Etruscan priesthood, Romulus and his successors are mere dilettantes in sacred matters, for they merely repeat the ritual actions carefully without understanding their importance». Parallel with Mamurius' simulatory «artistic» commission, Perniola can maintain that the intention of the Roman rite was not to celebrate - it was rather «a commemoration whose function was to forget». «The words of the rite were incomprehensible, even for the priests who pronounced them.» From this Perniola concludes (via an argument that shows that the powers in Rome kept their distance from miracles which might prejudice public order) that myth belongs to miracle while rites belong to history; the miracle happens once and for all, while rites are repeated infinitely.

Much the same situation occurs in the relationship between the Greek «tèhkne», which refers both to the fine arts as well as to good craftsmanship and technological inventions - that is, the sciences - and the Latin «ars» which derives from the Indo-European root «ar» - which denotes order. That is, a social consensus. As we know, this has nothing to do with «origin». True, I do not believe that Perniola intended to apply his findings directly to our own time, but certainly there is art from the eighties which

is closer to «ars» than to «tehkne». Jeff Koons, for example. On Swedish soil it is, however, obvious that the art of the eighties carelessly mixes both «ars» and «tehkne», both in terms of origin and aims. One is very conscious of creating «art», but equally concerned with inventing, differing and commenting.

Whatever happened to the Roman sense of the «genuine», the deeply personal which must be protected for integrity's sake, all the rites that have to do with ancestors and family? These were restricted to an entirely private sphere, becoming «clearly separated from the demystified "sacra publica"». Roughly applied to the eighties one could argue that in parallel with rites in society losing their faithfulness and becoming a «game», people have been devoting themselves to their own family's authentic future; the baby boom became fact.

And Perniola himself, who with this essay seemed to unequivocally come down on the side of the reality of human consensus, appeared in the Summer 1991 issue of Artforum with a long article on the lack of «the sublime» in contemporary art and argued, in fact, for tactile communication and for the body as the vital factor in a truly intense, artistic experience.

The new migration into the city can be seen demographically since the beginning of the eighties. Though youthful culture was, in the beginning, confined to the suburbs. Punk - that genre of music which is close to «wild» painting - existed in the southern suburbs of Stockholm. As the decade progressed and the artistic trend became increasingly intellectualized, expression owed less to visual rock music; the culture's mythological centre shifted to the historical city. The late eighties nourish «romantic notions about the urban flow, a mythical City»*5*. It appears - for the nocturnal wanderer - to be lit now by street lamps, now by neon. Its music is a muted trumpet from the Miles Davis of the eighties, accompanied by synthesizers.

It is an ironic fact, with a certain sense of loss, that this «mystical City» appears parallel with the idea of the divided subject.

The Passages



Johan Scott took part in several of the most significant exhibitions of the early eighties, including «ibid. I and II». His name is often coupled with that of Håkan Rehnberg, and they have exhibited together on several occasions, most recently at Stockholm's Konstakademi (Academy of Fine Arts) in January 1991. But similarities between them should not be sought. They are of two different temperaments. Johan Scott can be briefly described as an unfaithful picture-maker; someone who avidly studies and sketches geometrical patterns and then relates to them mainly by departing from them.

The text below is taken from an introduction I wrote for the catalogue of the exhibition «Hypotes: Ormen» (Hypothesis: The Snake) at Konstakademien, Stockholm in 1991.

«Johan Scott's "Passages" (see frontpage) are the cityscape. However as I read it I find no focus for the mind; my mind is absorbed by the mood, in darkness and daylight, like the shadow of a presence.

Somewhere on the road between calculation and improvisation lies a point at which Johan Scott can let

loose without foundering in the boundless.

A number of painters from the Renaissance are important, among them Piero della Francesca, where the figures in the drama and the story it tells are all kept in place by a geometrical pattern. Scott is primarily interested in the binding power of the pattern (rather than the event portrayed by the Renaissance painting).

He bears within him a picture-maker who must both be appeased and betrayed! And for this reason he is attracted by the linguistic praxis in which the text, the weave, rather than the grasping of the reader, allow him to pass through.

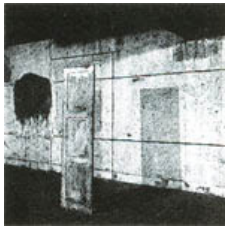
He sought a "narrow" picture as a point of departure: Piero's "The Flagellation" provided a structure. In "Passager" (Passages) the composite picture places 4 x 4 (separated) pictorial squares together in a rectangular form. Each square is a passage. (Scott maintains that this has nothing to do with Walter Benjamin's "Passage Work": "When I make a picture it is precisely that: a picture; I have no mythological or literary pretensions".)

The picture's open character provides a dangerous invitation to the gaze to fantasize freely. How does he avoid overly encouraging this?

By stopping on the threshold of an anecdote. This is the urban landscape. Figures may pass through its openings unnoticed. The city is a landscape of people. Here the individual is so unnoticed that he could just as easily be excluded - for everything is anyway but a trace of human operations. Contrasted with the builder's fixed pattern and the growing geometry are the fragmentary layers and the aesthetic of decay.

It is a question of letting one divine the possible dramas and anecdotes pertaining to the place. For where is the epic force of a story that is entirely explicit?»

Places



Making a room
is the setting apart
of localities where a god
appears, of localities
the gods have left,
of localities where the
arrival of the gods
will be delayed for
a long time yet.
Making a room creates
the inner geography
of the locality which
prepares for
habitation. Profane
rooms are always a
privation of what
were formerly
sacred rooms.
Martin Heidegger,
Die Kunst und der Raum

That art has moved into rooms other than those specifically created for it is rather the rule than the exception, historically speaking. One could cite the Louvre, the Jeu de Paume in Paris or Stockholm's Moderna Museet whose premises on the island of Skeppsholmen were originally the navy's drill hall and gymnasium.

When art moves in, a joyful exceeding of the premises' previous significance often takes place. A fact that has been suppressed so that the individual works of art will not have to compete for attention. Using Heidegger's terminology one could say that the works of art, the collection, give the free extent of the place the profile of a defined neighbourhood. The locality is the neighbourhood's arena. Here the object makes its appearance, but since the collection of objects is the reason behind the making of the room and thus the reason for both locality and neighbourhood, the object cannot be separated from the room.

«The weaving together of art and room would then have to be considered through the experience of locality and neighbourhood.» And the emptiness in this context is not a lack of anything «but a production», Heidegger maintains and concludes with the following quotation from Goethe:

«It is not always essential for truth to be embodied, it is sufficient that the spiritual floats around us creating unity when, like the sounding of a bell, it penetrates the air at once and friendly.»¹

For a variety of reasons the play between art and room in the eighties resulted in a large number of different exhibition premises. Suitable old buildings were made use of, for example, the former generating station in Malmö which was acquired by the financier Frederik Roos and which became

the Rooseum. Kulturmagasinet in Sundsvall, a glassed-in intersection of four grocer's warehouses, is another award-winning project. Galleries such as Sten Eriksson on Stockholm's Marknadsgatan (now Krüll), a former metal workshop, or Nordenhake in the Academy of Fine Arts building, in what was formerly a banking hall, created new spaces that lent themselves to installations. Läderfabriken in Malmö and Konstpidemin in Gothenburg should be considered as special cases in which industrial and hospital premises have come to serve both as studios and exhibition halls with something that seems typical of the times: allowing the original atmosphere make itself felt in its meeting with the new activities. The Läderfabrikens saga is, alas, already finished, but Konstpidemin (situated in Gothenburg's former isolation hospital) lives on. Yet these examples hardly justify quoting Heidegger so laboriously as an introduction.

Instead it is a matter of installations which make direct use of the fact that a locality always has, to a greater or lesser degree as we carelessly would have it, a spirit. And localities whose aura has faded seem to be especially suitable for temporary installations. A locality that reminds one of absence, rather than presence. A special lack of something - not a «fault» in the room; rather something missing in the poet Ekelöf's sense, something absent which appears as the resonant point of the room - an absence that can only be encountered poetically.²

«The journey takes place in stages. Gradually we get used to the thought that reality ceases to exist outside the building. We speak of the building's dual message: freedom and desperation. Freedom to remain outside - not just the market and the museums, but outside contemporary society in general. Desperation in the cold light that shines on everybody working in the house: a question of living or dying. The freedom to isolate the task itself from a finished work of art, a conclusive picture. To discover the tentative and aimless, the accidental, the cancelled work. The desperation over the fact that each room, somewhere, can be the final painting: the traces can never be washed away. Every second, every millimetre is replete with time past, the myriads of unconnected quotations on the walls seek meaning, a language. What are we waiting for? The courage to turn away from all this, to cross it out, paint over it, forget. Increasingly to realize that there is another house: without content, completely empty, without time, without sentimentality. That it exists only to intensify our presence, to surrender us to our tools and our ideas.

We shall love this house because it restored to us our childhood hardness.»

I have chosen to quote the introduction from the first «ibid.» catalogue in extenso. A thin, brown brochure with hard covers entitled «workbook». It was produced for the opening on October 16, 1982. The nine participating artists were: Max M. Book, Bård Breivik, Jan Håfström, Sivert Lindblom, Alf Linder, Richard Nonas, Håkan Rehnberg, Johan Scott and Sven Åsberg. The project started in the summer of 1982. The Swedish Cooperative Society allowed the artists the use of an abandoned linseed-oil factory at Danviken in Stockholm; five stories totalling 3500 m². The artistic background is apparent from the preceding quotation. Essentially the text is the work of Jan Håfström - the tone of the article is typical of Håfström - but it is also a distillation of what all the participants felt in relation to their task. It deserves to be read and re-read since it contains so much of both the longing and the agony each individual feels towards the act of creation, as well as saying something about a particular stage in the

contemporary artistic situation.

It was time to protect one's integrity as an artist, time to let oneself work without regard to sociological, populist, commercial or «political» side effects. All the things that in the seventies had legitimized art. It was time to speak and act on one's own behalf. For this, nothing more was required than a place of one's own. Or if you prefer: A locality that put up a particular opposition to being intensified into a district. Just the type of locality that - as the Heidegger quotation has it - «the gods have abandoned», a locality to liberate.

The old factory is particularly suitable because the eighties made the concept of «post-industrial» a household word. And the decayed building also relates to the ruin, which should certainly appeal those who have interested themselves in a fragmentary aesthetic; the attitude of the participants holds a considerable degree of romance. It is still damp from the historical soil from which it has been excavated, but romance soon becomes established as one of the permanent ingredients of the eighties. And then it is provided with quotation marks.

The artists' attitude to the old factory was continually one of seeking. One could challenge the room, or be almost silenced by it. One could measure oneself against the room and realize how small one was. The room was everything, but one scarcely managed to surmount it. To this extent the old factory became a cathedral. Once upon a time it had, in fact, contained the virile faith in the future of the industrial era. It was a room dedicated to production. The absence in the room is the same as the absence of one who has lost his convictions. One might make a comparison with the experience of the ego of someone who, with faltering faith, enters the cathedral that God has abandoned.

In this situation it is clear that the actor in such a room lets himself be compared with the subject who, in language, is no longer master of the meaning and movement of the story. «ibid. » appears as a forceful symbol of the overall situation laid out for the contemporary artist by the main theoretical bearing of the eighties.

Which is not to say that everybody will recognize his or her self.

That the linseed-oil factory was set alight by vandals in the following winter also belongs to the symbolism. Its charred innards were documented in the workbook to «ibid. II» one year later in the ruined premises of the München brewery. Faced with the burnt factory Horace Engdahl wrote of the ashes: «They are not a form but a trace, saying nothing of what was than that it no longer is». And he quoted Jacques Derrida:

«Between white and black the colour of the text is similar only to the «literalness» of the ashes which is still contained in a language. In ashes of words, in the ashes of a name, the ashes themselves, literally - the one he loves - have disappeared. The term ashes is, in turn, the ashes of the ashes themselves.»

Feu la centre, ANIMA 5 (1982)

Yves Klein appears like a flash in the midst of my associations: «My painting is merely the ashes of my art».

The three «ibid.»³ must, nevertheless, be considered as solitary events. They did not create a trend. But many similar types of exhibitions left their mark on the decade.

In the autumn of 1982 twelve Nordic artists came to Stockholm to «take over» 1,000 m² of empty space in the old Serafimer hospital. Here too, was a special interaction between the exhibits and the premises. As was the case with the exhibition «KAM» in the old automobile factory in Augustendal outside Stockholm in 1987. There was also an exhibition in March 1984 in the abandoned buildings of the Swedish Mint in Hantverkargatan: Mikael Pauli and Lars Åkerlund created a real fairground show with sculpture and sound installations; a so-called multi-media show.

Yet another category is provided by those galleries whose choice of premises underlines the importance of the situation. Both of Kim Klein's creations "BarBar" on Jacobsgatan in central Stockholm (now demolished) and "Lido" formerly a cinema on Södermalm, housed and continue to house several different types of activities; music, film, literature, dance. A club for private members is part of the space, and this has been a trend of the eighties in the Swedish capital. There is no ambition to reach «everybody». Rather it is a question of preserving one's own specifics - even at a party. «Forum» on Sigtunagatan is another example. Here the premises have retained their raw character. The plaster on the walls gives off an aroma and one watches one's steps with care to avoid stumbling.

But do not let my comments detract from the seriousness behind these galleries. Much of the very best art has been shown here. And the inwardness serves to sharpen the visitor's concentration. Crossing boundaries is another advantage. This is nothing unique to Stockholm. The original influences came from New York; of both clubs and exhibitions being attached to a particular place. Here too, can one point to similarities between the sixties and the eighties.

Perhaps we should mention the theatre. The seventies were the decade of the theatre. Independent theatre groups appeared in great abundance. Their tendency was to be agitating and political. With the eighties came a re-theatricalization of the art form. The independent ballet dance companies multiplied as did mime. Again it was not unusual to seek out odd premises for performances - either for want of a stage or for curiosity. Linguistically the theatre provides an opening: Thalia's house was not named for the actors, nor for the place where the action takes place, but for the section of the room designated to the audience. There is a similar development in art. During the eighties the exhibition commissioner, formerly an invisible entity, stepped into the lights as the curator, almost a producer. And the general accession to Marcel Duchamp's notion that «the viewer makes the pictures» integrated interpretation and viewer in art in a manner that clearly separates the eighties from the seventies. Not least for this reason is it necessary to treat that which surrounds art, that is, the context. An extreme example is «Den svenska drömmen» (The Swedish Dream), an exhibition compiled by the critic John Peter Nilsson at Galleri Enkehuset in Stockholm in 1989. Here the art was exhibited in a copy of a typical Swedish flat - three rooms, kitchen and bathroom, from 1957.⁴

Art fairs also belong to the eighties. The most commercial of artistic surroundings turned out to be the most genuinely popular. Art fairs have become for contemporary art, from the point of view of a mass public, what auctions are for older art. Clearly, many visitors experience the absence of intellectual pretensions as liberating. A good fair compares to an exhibition like a poster to a cultural article.

Sooner or later one is obliged to open the paper.

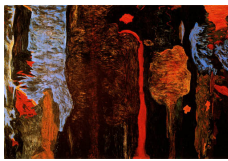
A CONFESSION



Ten years of art criticism has, without exception, been based on my meeting with the work of art in the room. When I look back on the art I have encountered, I can visualize the premises where the meeting took place. The various premises can, of course, influence my experience in one direction or another. But this is not important.



I should never have sought out these places if the works of art had not called me there. Without this call there is no «art» - whatever that is. Or, more precisely: Art - and I am thinking of «ars» rather than «tehkne», more of an ordering or an agreement, a discipline rather than an invention - is, as the word suggests, a fancy, an appearance, a masque; in Jung's terminology a persona. The challenge is that which hides behind, at one and the same time the cause of the masque and he who wears the masque. This special chaos, this anima of the work of art, is not identical with the individual artist but with the - more or less lost - subject which speaks in the work of art.

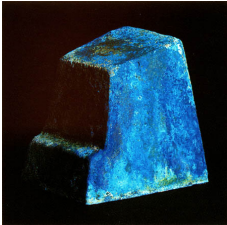


That this subject, which has been endlessly discussed in the art theory and criticism of the eighties, is not patriarchal, monolithic, traditional, unified, strong, powerful, universal or governing - but mocking, dark, divided, constructed (namely in the symbolic interaction of the work of art), nomadic. Peripheral to, rather than central in, the space (but not in the discussion) - this does not mean that the subject is missing. Or that its challenge has been silenced. Out of «the masque» art still calls to us, otherwise I should not have been sitting here writing.

Perhaps my limit is the thought of a non-authentic subject, a simulated will. But why should someone do something without being willing to do it (other than being forced to)? Possibly in order to say something about the concept of «will»; perhaps to remove the conceptual from the act of will, to peel from our «will» the notions that we have of it. But in this case it is a question of a peripeteia, a turning point in the drama or a catastrophe in the etymological sense; a turning, a dissolution. The eighties have not been shy of visiting such wastelands. Yet - everything that is made is created by someone. And half of the challenge comes from myself, from the viewer. At this point in the argument the thought arises that what we call «typical eighties» is largely a product of the interpreters. And this is a problem that the next decade will inherit from the eighties.

What I am writing about is my meeting with the subject that speaks from the work of art. Initially it makes no difference whether the subject is facing me, whether it is lying, whether it is indistinct or refuses to speak. Not even if it is silent. But the answer one gets depends on how one asks. And how do the eighties call?

The Work of Art



Initially with a loud voice. Unexpected. At least for one who, in the preceding decade, felt that there was an inability to listen; the propaganda and the campaigns of the seventies did not wait to be answered. (Such was the ethos of the times. But there is another side of the seventies; attentive, visionary, transparent, as in the case of Harald Lyth or Curt Asker. Or with weightier metaphors: Björn Lövin, Ulrik Samuelson, Sivert Lindblom, Olle Kåks - they have all been working *con bravura* during the eighties.)¹

But viewed from within art there was a double reason for «speaking one's mind». Partly there was the contempt for art as such. In society, in education and in the media. And partly there was the fact that advanced artistic theory, to the extent that one came into contact with it, was dominated by conceptual and minimalist ideas. Thus the so-called *heftige Malerei* seemed liberating.

From the very beginning Claes Eklundh went his own way «obsessed with his own independence; he raised non-conformity to a norm».² It was the late sixties. Life-drawing, which had then begun to be favoured anew by the students at the Academy of Fine Arts, was a source of indifference to him. (Though he took to it later in Copenhagen.) His real breakthrough came towards the end of the seventies. Sea painting, portraits and later, torsos on a superhuman scale made powerful impressions, especially at that time. Yet there is still not a trace of *Heftigkeit*. Eklundh moved from strict classicism to a more expressive approach but his balancing pole stretches over several centuries; from Michelangelo to Pollock. His interest in pictorial language makes him an artist in the borderland between that which was and that which was to come. His most striking work is his expressive painting in tempera on paper which he began in the first years of the eighties. When Eklundh then chose to cut out torsos from this expressive painting, the classical and the expressionistic were combined in a manner which brought the mythological to life.³

The experience of his painting - as I met it in October 1982 - was dominated by his resolute approach in the application of paint. It made me think of an orchestra; it was like opening a wall into the firmament, as though the music of the spheres had me hovering in the air. The classical aspect in the positioning of the figures worked against the heaven-storming and, instead, led one's thoughts to the tragedies of antiquity; my lasting impression was a feeling of inner elevation, of catharsis.

A Cellar in Karlsviksgatan



Eklundh was one of the painters who, in the eventful year of 1982, exhibited in a cellar in Karlsviksgatan in Stockholm. The project - yet another of these manifestations in unconventional venues - was supported financially by Fredrik Roos who later founded the Rooseum in Malmö. A number of those who participated are of particular interest from the point of view of the eighties.

Eva Löfdahl, Max Book and Stig Sjölund had formed the group Wallda a couple of years earlier, named after the previous tenant (a health foods firm) of the premises which they now shared in Årsta, in the suburbs of Stockholm. As early as 1980 the three appeared with «Boplatss Otto», some loudly coloured boxes on a meadow between the blocks of flats and the industrial estate. This was a satire on the highly publicized housing fair «Boplatss 80». The choice of a stage in an interspace was to prove prophetic. For the excluded spaces in between are thematic to all three of them. The Wallda group might choose



different means of expression - they played punk-inspired rock, gave spontaneous performances and produced collective paintings in the heftige style that characterizes the early eighties. But they were reluctant to be termed heftige or «wild» in a German or Kreyzbergish sense. Heftige Malerei never made a real impact on Swedish soil. «For a few months everyone painted in the heftige idiom» is a remark that one has heard since, but Swedish artists, with few exceptions, were neither that self-fixated, nor that fixated on the male power mythology which characterized the genre's brief culmination on German soil.

Of the Wallda group, it is primarily Max Book who has persisted with painting. He has also worked with film but otherwise has remained faithful to his basic impulse. The thick, pastelike paint and the cityscape have followed him on a journey towards a heavier, darker palette, a quieter room, an unknown, beckoning pitch black darkness. A landscape can be both the setting for the drama and its principle character. The language is no longer a trans-luminated tool. Max Book has used various ways to find gaps in descriptions of reality. He has mixed together categories like landscape and decor, nature and culture, signs and matter with such obstinacy and bravura as to make himself the very epitome of a «painter of the eighties».

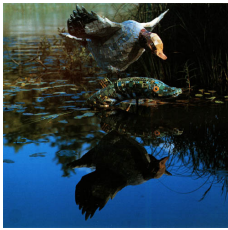
«Gaps», Max Book writes, «arise when different events, modes of expression, aesthetic systems, in short, totally different types of entities are placed in the same focus».⁴

Book's «gap» is a focal point for much of the hypothesizing during the eighties. Book's own titles are often suggestive of this; frequently they are constructed to produce words with no agreed meaning: «Hypotea», «Kontinuens», «Fatalek» - they almost sound like something, often something threatening. «Fatalek», as in «fatal» and «catafalque», for example. But these titles also make use of real terms such as «guilt» («Culpa» - also the legal term for carelessness), or a «broken metaphor» («Katakres» (Catachresis)). This last provides an opening to what the pictures deal with: A reality that cannot quite be kept whole. The boundaries are broken, the patterns of thought untenable. This lends a chaotic freedom, just as one can feel a sense of calm faced with darkness when what is lit up has been compromised. And if the eighties have enjoyed a freedom of their own, it has been just such a freedom - from self-evident truths, ready-made answers and unalterable patterns.

It is worth pointing out that the ideological demolition in the outer world which resulted in the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the communist utopia which is being replaced by a more unconditional search for forms of solidarity, was also played out in art and philosophy an entire decade or more before the outer reality began to behave like a confirmation of this discussion.

For me the special discussion of the eighties regarding deconstructed illusions - and the halting feeling of emerging hope - will be accompanied by the picture of Max Book's painting in its characteristically heavy orchestration «for seven tubas and Glockenspiel», as Ulf Linde somewhat maliciously but appreciatively characterized it.

Less and Less Heftige Painting



During the eighties there is a movement away from expressive painting towards a more intellectualized and reflective stance which has often best been expressed in a type of sculpture, preferably called an object, or in photobased art, often cibachrome photographs of a large scale. The major exhibitions support this view: «Zeitgeist», 1982's monumental exhibition in the Martin-Gropius Bau in Berlin, was characterized by painting displaying large gestures while «Metropolis», 1991, was conceptual and mostly showed objects of various sorts. The exhibition catalogue spoke of a movement from Picasso to Duchamp. This development is mirrored in the shift from «Känsla och Hårdhet» («Gefühl und Härte» (Feeling and Hardness)) at Stockholm's Kulturhuset in 1982, to the «Implosion» exhibition at Moderna Museet in 1987 which I am prepared to call postmodernism's late arrival on Swedish soil. The other two members of the Wallda group exemplify this line of development.

Eva Löfdahl, like Max Book, has taken part in a considerable number of group shows such as *ibid.* (II), Lakun, Lund 1984, *helldunkelhell*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin 1986, etc. As with Book, she has also shown an interest in what is revealed in the linguistic cracks - she implies that art cannot just be seen as a language. «My work is not constructed with language». Asked whether she thinks that an object is better able to contain different linguistic systems than the written and spoken language she answers: «Yes, an object can at the same time unite contemporaneity and difference. I can imagine a cluster of meanings that otherwise have no context but which in the form of an object can be seen as proximities - as though they had a connection».⁵

Her manifestations have wandered from the purely figurative to a more abstract painting of signs to objects which show a demanding un-communicativeness. The eighties have meant thinking «both-and»; Eva Löfdahl's more recent objects seem precisely like models - in many cases they are built up on a disc that carries the most tense parts - to bring together a possible «readability» with a materially repudiative attitude. Her intention may be to preserve a state of latent possibilities, «a form of balancing points which are not to tip in any direction».*9* Perhaps, rather than terming it an unreadable metaphor - a catachresis - one can imagine a space in between on the periphery of linguistic possibilities, neither literary picture nor some part representing the whole. Not in the least because there is no «whole» available.

A relationship with thoughts like these becomes apparent in her interest for «spaces in between», interspaces. A bent she shares with many others in the aesthetic discussions of the eighties. With Eva Löfdahl the interspaces are «the provinces of omission». «There are the postponed decisions, compromise candidates and what just happened».

«Search for places that the useful no longer reaches. Worn out, fusty. Like the park where the sunflowers have taken over. They grow tall, beautiful, just for their own sake. Places for a meeting where all is voice, where all is open ear.»⁶

To characterize «the objects of the interspace» is a delicate task. How can one draw attention to these without this leading to an «animation»? That is, if the intention is not to «give poetic lustre» but to really try to see insignificance as it is. The critic Peter Cornell lists the insignificant objects in the work of Cezanne, Morandi, de Chirico, Giacometti, Breton, Duchamp and the Belgian conceptualist Guillaume Bijl in the history of rhopography. The opposite is «megalography», paying homage to everyday objects.

Duchamp selected his ready-mades in «a mood of indifference, without aesthetic feeling... “a total absence of good or bad taste» (Duchamp). «Duchamp’s ready-mades have been awarded an amnesty from the hard labour of use and as signs they distance themselves even more than the surrealists’ objects from the reference».⁷

Eva Löfdahl sees an interspace as something which cannot be unambiguously pointed to and delimited in reality and, even less, can it be photographed.

When an interspace is exploited a trend is created. In the world of fashion the eighties have been very clear on this point, as illustrated by all the retro-styles. They create an especial eclecticism where the genuine and imitation are mixed: Typical «gap».

A cocktail glass might be a typical motif for Stig Sjölund at the beginning of the eighties, when painting was his primary means of expression. He has always maintained an ironic distance to the typically Swedish obsession with «nature». In later years he has devoted increasing attention to cibachromes. His art exhibits a remarkable duality: at one and the same time an icy, polished surface, simulated documentary photography and a romantically tense sensitivity. At the time of writing (December 1991) he has reached his most remarkable choice so far: Cibachromes of threatening scenes from everyday life are combined with furniture and furnishing details from IKEA. These popular emblems lose their well known aura in this company - as though the most usual gap in the home was now filled with the functionalism of indifference, which is also a construction kit, simulated do-it-yourself. The titles are gap words, such as one uses for filling in: «Då så» (Well), «OK» , etc.

But this description leads us directly into the world of objects and linguistic signs that characterize the late eighties. It is not easy to portray this late period today with any great precision which is why this text is most concerned with the slightly earlier art of the eighties. This is the reason, too, for the male dominance in the selection. The feminine advance of the last few years is a prelude to the nineties. It would seem that only now is art being created that can be directly connected with the extensive showing of, in particular, American art that the exhibition «Implosion» at Moderna Museet in the autumn of 1987 included. This artistic and theoretical recruitment of the post-modernist discourse stretched from Duchamp and Picabia via James Rosenquist, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Don Judd, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke to Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Allen McCollum - works by a total of 28 artists.

Painterly Sovereignty

The remarkable painter Jarl Ingvarsson's motifs may be taken from the myths of popular culture or from everyday life such as «kaffe med tårta» ((celebratory) Coffee and Gateau) or «blombukett på en rutig duk» (Bouquet on a Chequered Cloth). He is expressive in his use of colour, is not shy of the most strident effects - as a totality the picture remains remarkably well-balanced and sensitively musical; his use of line is as pregnant as the sound of Dexter Gordon's tenor sax: raw, but extraordinarily exact, an inner elegance hiding beneath blunt expression. He combines a feeling for life, sweetness and tragedy in the most unbelievable manner. The comic heroes of yesterday (such as Dick Tracy) have not been lacking in the art of the eighties, but with Ingvarsson this inheritance from pop art seems to have a

superstructure of legends, of sacred contexts - as though the figures belonged to an order of brothers and sisters of mercy. His style of painting might seem reminiscent of «heftige Malerei» if it were not for the fact that every sign of desperation seems to have been excluded; the «wild» expression is countered by an unavoidable sense of eternity.

Rolf Hanson also has an undeniable special place in the painting of the eighties. At first sight one may be tempted to fall for euphemisms such as «grandiose», «masterly», etc. This is proper to the extent that Hanson is not afraid of working on a large, almost symphonic scale with an overpowering effect. But it is the aspect of encompassing, rather than striking, that remains the final impression. One is immediately transported to another world; prior to language, prior to questions - beyond conclusions.

Hanson paints - he explained in a rare interview⁸ - using a vision which develops while he is working; the process of painting is what interests him. «It's the same in music. You let it happen and experience what comes out directly.» Hanson avoids what is common, stretches out into the unknown by the very act of painting. His roots are to be found in turn-of-the-century symbolism; a quotation from Gustave Moreau was his sole comment to his exhibition at Moderna Museet in 1985. «I do not believe in what I touch nor in what I see. I believe in what I cannot see and solely and exclusively in the message of my feelings».

A manifesto at odds with the aesthetics of the eighties. A feeling directly «from the gut». His particular structure and, as time passes, increasingly poisonous use of colour are one of the decade's truly original modes of expression. Which does not prevent us from reading a dialogue with older painting into his work.

The critics have tiptoed round his work, giving the most varied judgements, frequently within the confines of the same review. Thus it is apparent that Hanson works somewhere between signs and abstraction; that his seductive painting dissolves the viewer's «ego»; that he is a depraved romantic or a romantic visionary. Sometimes we find ourselves within decaying nature, sometimes in an «amalgamated nature».

Is he a «traditional "master painter"» or a «contemporary, aware linguistic player»? If one is to believe his own words there is little reason for the latter conclusion. But, on the other hand, the creator cannot claim to be the sole interpreter... In some ways Rolf Hanson is proof of the pluralism of the decade, not merely because of his ideology but because of his worldly success. Besides the exhibition at Moderna Museet that was mentioned, he has received the PS1 stipend and has represented Sweden at the Biennale in Venice in 1988 and, later the same year, at «Rosc» in Dublin.

Linguist - and Chilly Romantic



Pluralism was the word. If you are looking for Rolf Hanson's diametrical opposite in Swedish painting of the eighties Lars Nilsson comes readily to mind. True, he is a «player of language» and has been elected the most «implacable anti-romantic» of the decade.¹⁰ Typically he does not recognize himself under this label, but his painting certainly invites semiotic interpretation. Having chosen a highly personal course of study, and after a quantity of landscapes and abstract paintings, he produced his first pictures based on painting over pictures from the mass media some years into the eighties. He has thematized these in a continuing study of authenticity.

The pictures from the American porn-mag Hustler are particularly illustrative. Nilsson's act of copying them may lead one's thoughts to the example given in the account of Mario Pernola's theory earlier in this text. Lars Nilsson seems both to have copied and demagnetized the pornographic element in the pictures. But what is the significance of the misty grey paint on top? It seems to find its function only when the paintings are hung; at the installation. All the pictures have the same rectangular shape and size and are mounted in accordance with a minimalist code. In this way they are petrified, the women - simulating orgasm - are frozen beneath a membrane of unreality. And the sensation is naturally strengthened by the repetitiveness of the showing. Nilsson intends to fuse the legacy from Andy Warhol with that of minimalism. He is out to find a state of both-and; his interest in simulation does not exclude authenticity. «If one is to undertake a subversive act I believe that it is a good thing to be in some way in love with what one wants to problematize, otherwise the result may easily be mere empty protests. Even if one wishes to deny authenticity it is still a precondition on some level».¹¹

Other paint-overs have depicted «pretty boys» from fashion magazines beneath the transparent membrane. I met them in Sten Eriksson's white cellar, in a characteristically minimalist series installation. The effect was immediate. My association was to the war graves under the white crosses, victims of the trenches in World War I. The petrification of the picture seemed to change the paintings into grave-stones. I shuddered. And when the motifs appeared I was not far removed from the global threat of aids. But in this clarity the impression yielded: I realized that I had read too much into them and was left with a divided feeling of discomfort and pleasure at the pit of the stomach.

There is a projected desire to protect these victims in Lars Nilsson's paintings. As though he wanted to save these souls from the petrifying grasp of the media picture. How far is one from the Pygmalion myth? The question will, presumably, remain unanswered.

The problem in Lars Nilsson's media pictures is not an entirely new one in Swedish postwar art. The first person to formulate the need for being in love with one's victim - like the seducer who, for an instant, seduces himself - was Ola Billgren.

Prelude in the Sixties



His debut was in 1954 (at the age of 14), and during the sixties he created a neo-realistic style of painting with roots in the aesthetics of the group round Alain Robbe-Grillet and the film makers of the nouvelle vague in Paris. Meticulous paintings of, for example, pictures from popular magazines mapped the way in which the new media-consumers read pictures. After an investigative style of painting using a weightier realism, for example, during the seventies, Billgren returned to a more «romantic» style of

painting in the early eighties. That is to say: A style of painting which investigates the aesthetic peculiarities of romanticism, notably the fragment, but also the particularities of its colouring.

His suite of 19 «Romantic Landscapes» is by far the most important graphic work of the eighties. All of the sheets are based on sketches in the form of collages. Billgren no longer sketches with a pen. He moves beyond the pictorial logic that is connected with handwriting. The fragments from popular magazines that he uses for his collages have their counterparts in the literary style of Novalis and in Frédéric Chopin's «Preludes». In both cases there is an unfinished, open, romantic form. Billgren looks for what is preliminary in this aesthetic; he rigorously avoids finality. He takes us by the hand and leads us to something half lost, half preserved. As in an act of remembrance where the memory consists of what forgetfulness has distractedly allowed us to keep. We are not in control of these memories. Billgren's «Romantic Landscape» would seem to have been created in an act of forgetting, with the intention of commemorating a memory.

Ola Billgren continually balances his painterly intuition with a highly developed linguistic consciousness of the structural facts of the narrative figures. A balanced style of painting with double signifiers. A seduction with the aim of leading us into the truly foreign - even when the motifs seem familiar. As a romantic he is an «agent provocateur»¹² - beauty has nothing to do with aesthetic security in the case of Ola Billgren.

In this sense he might serve as a model for several artists of the eighties - the decade has been that of the recurring styles. But this is not a matter of eclecticism in the normal sense. When the artist of the eighties reuses an historical style it is with a conscious distance to it. Frequently paired with great insight into it. False classicism becomes, at once, classicism and something else. The same applies to the expressionism of the early eighties. Or the forms of informalism or naivism that have occurred. If - using Max Book's terminology - we find the «gap» in our picture of reality we can say two disparate things at the same time. Like Groucho Marx, with a tenderness that does not always convince, who breaks out in sympathy: «Don't worry, time wounds all heels».

Such a subversive virus planted in the nervous system which brings significance to the language could lead to the breakdown of all artistic intentionality. It could lead to a chilling contempt for the public. Such extremes are nowhere to be seen on Swedish soil. The artists' strong sense of their own experience combined with the special Swedish sluggishness (which I touched on in my introduction) have, instead, created a duality that has saved commitment in what was otherwise a chilly climate in the aesthetics of the late eighties. This trend is general and international; after the warm trans-avant-garde comes the cold one.¹³

Modern Melancholy

In common with Ola Billgren, Jan Häfström made his début in the sixties. His range of expression stretches over both clearly figurative forms as well as abstract ones. In his more recent work, minimalism has a special place as a formal element. During the eighties he has been responsible for a number of works with which the decade will definitely be associated.

«In Jan Häfström's vision, whatever may seem familiar is compressed into another form, torn away from

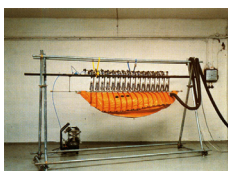
the comfortable reference, broken or smothered with paint and cloth because he senses the decay of everything comprehensible and light-filled and unified.»¹⁴

Håström is a painter who, (in common with Ola Billgren) does not obey Goethe's «Bilde Künstler, rede nicht». From time to time he has been an highly emphatic art critic and his close collaboration with the editors of the periodical *Kris*¹⁵ has linked his work to literature. He «shares the darkness of Charles Baudelaire, the fatalist paradoxes of Franz Kafka, the ethical inversions of Jean Genet».¹⁶ Right from the start his motifs have circled round fragmentization, ruination, decay. But he stretches over the metaphores of both nature and the urban landscape in these contexts. The layering in his pictorial language can equally well be construed as organic.

From the simplified and very compact objects of the early eighties arise the mythical atmospheres of intrusive passion and unavoidable silence; as though that which has too much to relate must remain silent. «Oblivion and memory are not separate categories, they are counter-motions forming a magnetic field.» The words are his own.

Håkan Rehnberg, too, belongs to this circle close to *Kris*. Which gives one reason to conclude that he is very well acquainted with theory and that his exegetes have, on occasion, good reason for interpreting his works discursively. Works that are characterized by a special sort of facelessness.

In the Margins of the Knowledge



Rehnberg avoids the figure's presence in the picture against a background of a very particular story, usually a Greek myth. It may be Orpheus, Achilles or Antigone - someone with whom death catches up with and who is absorbed into matter. Antigone is immured, alive, in a cave. Achilles enters «the road to honour/death». «He is hollowed out, increasingly becoming just armour and shell.» And with a quotation from *The Iliad* where the hero loses consciousness «on the sand by the roaring sea», Rehnberg discovers «a point at which the law of action, writing and reading empties the language of meaning and exposes its lustre».¹⁷ The quotation gives a glimpse of the contours of Maurice Blanchot's world of literary philosophy. It seems to be a question of a language beyond that which can be determined, beyond the knowable:

«Blanchot's passion for literature is not aestheticism, it is an implacable struggle to make contact with what he terms "that which is neutral".

That which is neutral are the gaps in the knowable web, neither subject nor object, neither proposing nor denying. An absence at the heart of our experience, a reality so proximate as to be ungraspable.

What is it? It is that which is not captured by the question: "what is it?"»¹⁸

«When I speak I am always employing a power structure», Blanchot writes. It is, thus, a question of finding a passion, a desire that has not solidified as power. Rehnberg's flaming colours seem to suggest an invisible presence as it appears prior to being manifest, before one nails down the truth, thereby formulating and cementing the answer. (Instead of simply devoting oneself to answering; that is to say, to lend dynamism to our attention to «what is yet to be heard».)

One of Rehnberg's most impressive works is the so-called Moira suite; 29 paintings on metal using a subdued but intensely flaming yellow. Moira, goddess of fate, seems at all times to appear among the flames, on the threshold of another world; invisible, elusive. For the Moira that allows herself to be captured in a picture is not the goddess of fate.

This is my own, spontaneous reaction to the suite. Other incendiary clouds of colour of Rehnberg's have made me think of a composer who, in a world without silence, is forced to organize the sounds into music whose innermost space is a constructed silence, the only possible one. The sounds and sights are merely the framework of what is not seen - of that which is the *raison d'être* of Rehnberg's painting.

Sculptural Integrity

In 1985 Stina Ekman installed «Gitter» in Stockholm's Moderna Museet. In a white room cluttered with hundreds of tiny sculptures in turquoise-tinted bronze, brushed aluminium or pearl-black balsa wood she had undertaken «an intuitive study of the number of sculptures contained within a cube measuring 60x60x60 mm».¹⁹ The title relates to the earthbound spatial patterns that atoms, ions or molecules generate in crystalline substances. Artistically Stina Ekman pairs this strictly scientific starting point with a highly refined aesthetic and an elementary, existential superstructure. This white room was certainly one of the most extraordinary of the eighties. Experiencing it cannot be compared with anything else. The varieties of sculpture seem more than can be grasped while their totality suggests a feeling of unity as found in the innermost regions of matter, but also beyond them. As though the spaces between the sculptures could be related to quite other philosophical discourses. And even leaving this aside, the tension between the minute sculptures is such that the spaces are visually highly invigorating. I recall from the room a bodily sensation of floating. Perhaps it was the light, accentuated by the small, impenetrable forms. Space and art indissolubly linked.

«Gitter» builds on a large and a small cube; the numerous tiny sculptures are related to the overall form (borrowing a musical term) of the room, but the extraordinary number of variations suggesting a universe of organic forms is an equally powerful theme of the installation.

Annette Senneby's sculptures seem to build entirely on their relation to the room, to its space and gravity. But, here too, there is a tension between sculpture as mass and as sign.

Annette Senneby occupies the room like someone setting up camp for the night. Spatially - not spaci-ously. Finding room is a question of concentrating on what there is room for and how there is room for it - rather than how the space is limited. Her sculpture is the solid form and its negation - and sign, rather than «picture».

She often works with sheet metal, staining the metal in an informal, very beautiful type of painting with romantic associations. It is a question of expressing weight without volume. Of creating an impression of physical material in the experience of the material's absence. Is this not how one experiences a shadow? And the shadow was a sign before ever mankind gave it a name - even the animals read it.

She can paint a canvas heavier than the sheet metal. But the works always bear a sculptural soul. Often they remain - flat - on the floor. Once a dancer, she has learnt to use the room with her body. Perhaps this is the secret behind the sculptures' both physical and calligraphic presence in the room.

Water Mirror - and Room on the Floor

Fredrik Wretman's art appears as a function in the room - and of the room. «The room becomes an authority in his installations».²⁰ He always employs water in his installations, as a mirror. The reflecting surface's opponent takes the form either of light or of pictures projected onto the surface of the water, cibachromes of floors from art galleries - and the room, which is reflected and which is continually made to reveal new, unexpected characteristics. The room - like the view, when the room has windows - is captured and placed on the floor. Fredrik Wretman, picture-catcher, is propelled by his curiosity. His expression is highly unified and always duplicated. The stillness is deceptive: a finger dipped into the water and the picture is hidden in the folds of the ripples.

The viewer stops in front of his room, which one can never enter, «a direct reference to the religious room where one can never come to the most holy place, where one is not allowed to go beyond a certain point in the room». The dividing line at the water is his iconostasis. Even the cibachrome floors are rooms which cannot be entered. Wretman restores the room as a holy place (and he speaks of the Lascaux caves as a model). One might be tempted to see a parallel to the fleeting face in Håkan Rehnberg's painting while, in the same way, his feeling for the room's tension makes one think of the *ibid.* exhibitions.

But Wretman feels different, more direct. He stresses the importance of what is seductively beautiful in the rooms he creates. «Something that it is not entirely clear about where it begins or ends». From the seemingly simple idea of pouring water onto the floor he extracts an infinite meaning. Stylistically this is a form of minimalism - but «filled with opportunities for associations».

In Wretman's exhibition «American Floors» at Moderna Museet in 1990, the cibachromes of floors from American museums and galleries were laid out on the floor and covered with glass. Using felt slippers bought from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, visitors were able actually to walk on the exhibition. But they were, still, no more able to enter into Wretman's rooms than before. Six millimetres of glass. Can one come closer and yet remain so far away?

In «American Floors» artistic space was, at last, given a chance to speak for itself; like a language pregnant with the atmosphere the works or art have left behind. Once again the language of art meets mankind's buildings in the art of the eighties. Yet again, one of these rooms, one of these localities that the creation of the room has liberated, «localities which the gods have fled». (Heidegger)

«It is unquestionably the case that rooms influence people much more than one supposes», says Wretman. «There must be an opening making it possible to see things differently from the builder.»

The artistic space of the eighties is, essentially, antiauthoritarian.

Close to the Nation - and Far Away from It



Many Swedish artists show an increasing interest in how the nation has changed, not in the least due to its lack of historical self-knowledge. The growth of the welfare state has swept away the ordinary citizen's means of expression in its enthusiasm for building the new, clean and neat Sweden. Swedish design of the twentieth century, for example, is just one long search for the simple, uncluttered form. Training in aesthetics and hygiene have gone hand in hand. In city after city, housing in the central parts has been demolished to be replaced by concrete and brick mastodons housing business and government. A cityscape as grey as the politicians' suits.



Somewhere on this slippery slope of conformist welfare aesthetics Ernst Billgren sticks his chin out without being explicitly polemical. The provocation underlying his work is to be found in his peculiarly rich creativity and his kitsch models; sort of mythical nordic animals - ducks, deer and badgers - frequently proud guardians. But the expression can change to the absurd or the pathetic.

Billgren does not protest and is not an "out and out" ironist. Rather, he manifests a special love for the Swede's habit of working in his garden and decorating it with funny sculptures.

Ernst Billgren uses his aesthetic language to put together fables or allegories that have an almost zenbuddhistic incomprehensibility (like koans: What is the sound of one hand clapping?): The duck that has just landed on the back of the pike is one such picture, displaying the openness that turns Billgren's works into open meeting places for various opinions rather than definite statements. An aesthetic of the eighties. Like the common decorative objects which form the works' starting point. (Here, as with Jarl Ingvarsson, there is an aspect of pop art in the Swedish eighties.)

Ernst Billgren's work can be read in diametrically opposed ways, both mythological and ironic (though the artist hardly stresses the latter). In both cases one can experience a deception at the level of significance when the meaning of the work cannot be deciphered according to a learnable linguistic code.²¹ It suggests what Max Book has called a «gap» in the picture of reality.

If Ernst Billgren has looked into the recent history of the nation, Ulf Rollof has gazed upon a world beyond national limits. His work is powerfully linked to the eternal questions of life and death, of salvation and downfall; he has concerned himself with catastrophe.

In September 1985 a massive earthquake struck Mexico City. Rollof, who was in the USA, made his way there, worried about friends he had made on an earlier visit. His experience of this city, struck by catastrophe, and again later in the little village of San Bartolo were important as a point of departure for his most extensive installation, «Lifeboat». Originally created for an exhibition at the Nordic Art Centre at Sveaborg, it was also shown at Moderna Museet in Stockholm and later, with additions, at the Biennale in Sao Paolo in 1991.

«Lifeboat» is composed of three parts: Twelve drawings of congenitally damaged calves' fetuses encased in bees wax and lit from beneath. They mark the catastrophe caused by nature or by mankind (who manipulates cattle causing the miscarriages).

A second part of the installation consists of 365 small lifeboats of synthetic wax and pigment, supplied

with blackberries encased in latex. These lifeboats, equipped with provisions, could be seen as salvation. One opportunity per day.

Between these two parts is a divided bellows, in which one half pumps up the other, whereupon there is a lengthy pause while it exhales and the process is repeated.

After a catastrophe there is «a sort of existential zero from which a culture must be invented anew, a preparation for what was to come». *22* In the field of tension between catastrophe and salvation, art takes place. It acts in a zone where exceptions are legion, «in which the distinction between morality and immorality has been cancelled... a zone which eradicates the distinction between sacred and profane and its secularized counterparts, spiritually and materially».

«The Bellows» can be read as a science of pneumatics, a doctrine that leads to a question of inspiration in the word's fundamental, historical sense. «Inspiration is a matter of being filled with air, but also of participating in a matter which is both personal and something foreign.»

The picture of art as the giver of life - or less formally - a breathing space; active in a space beyond rational calculation, and beyond the usual metaphors, is also a picture that complies well with my experience of much of the art of the eighties in Sweden. A picture which shows a sharpened linguistic preparedness paired with an irrepressible sense of the sublime.

FOOTNOTES

The Spacious Eighties

1. Engdahl, Horace; interview in Expressen 14 January 1990.
2. Expressen, 13 June 1980.
3. Nittve, Lars; Northern Poles, Lars Nittve, p. 277, Bløndal, Copenhagen 1986.
4. From the essay: Finkulturen åter (Back to Elite Culture!) Thomas Henrikson, Kulturrådet No. 6, 1991. Stockholm 1991.

The City

1. Nylén, Leif: Den exotiska staden (The Exotic City), Dagens Nyheter, 26 November 1991.
2. Engdahl, Horace; interview Expressen 14 January 1990.
3. Perniola, Mario: Ars et urbs. Swedish version in Kalejdoskop No. 6, 1983.
4. Nittve, Lars: ARTFORUM, December 1988.
5. Nylén, Lars: Moderna Tider, Stadens centrum och periferi (Modern Times, City Centre and Periphery), Dagens Nyheter 22 July 1989.

Places

1. Heidegger, Martin: Kunst und Raum. Swedish version in Hype No. 3-4, 1989-90.
2. Ekelöf, Gunnar: Utflykter; En outsiders väg (Outings; An Outsider's Path). From Promenader och utflykter, Bonniers 1941.
3. Besides those mentioned in the text, the following also took part in ibid. II: Ola Billgren, Rune Hagberg, Lars Olof Loeld, Eva Löfdahl, Björn Lövin, Lars Nilsson, Susan Weil, Johan Widén. (Richard Nonas did not take part in ibid. II) The third ibid show in Borås, November - December 1984 consisted of an installation by Jan Håfström and Alf Linder.
4. The following took part in «Den svenska drömmen» (The Swedish Dream), Galleri Enkehuset, November-December 1989: Kristina Elander, Ernst Billgren, Martin Wickström, Anders A, Jarl Ingvarsson.

The Work of Art

1. See Granath, Olle: Ett annat ljus (Another Light), Carlssons bokförlag, Stockholm 1986 and Nittve, Lars in Northern Poles, Bløndal, Copenhagen 1986.
2. Linde, Ulf in Claes Eklundh, Kalejdoskop, Åhus 1981 (together with Ola Billgren).
3. Nilsson, Bo: Claes Eklundh, Kalejdoskop, Åhus 1986.
4. Book, Max: Arbeten 1979-1988 (Works 1979-1988), Galleri Wallner, Malmö 1988.
5. Löfdahl, Eva, Hong Kong Press, Gothenburg 1991.
6. Frostenson, Katarina: Arnault, Jean-Claude: Överblivet (Abandoned). Katten förlag, Stockholm 1989.
7. Cornell, Peter: Mellanrummets föremål (Objects of the Interspaces) in Halifax No. 5, litterär kalender (literary calendar), Wahlström & Widstrand, Stockholm 1991.
8. Hanson, Rolf; interview in the catalogue to Nordiska paviljongen (The Nordic Pavilion) at la Biennale di Venezia, 1988.
9. Ericsson, Lars O.: Amalgamerad natur och en väg mot 90 talet (Amalgamated Nature and a Road to the Nineties). Dagens Nyheter 14 March 1989.
10. Ericsson, Lars O.: I symbolernas rike (In the Land of Symbols), Dagens Nyheter 29 September 1987. The article defends the art of the eighties and gave rise to an animated debate.
11. Nilsson, Lars; interview in Hype No. 1, 1988.
12. Nittve, Lars: Ola Billgren - agent provocateur i romantikens landskap (Ola Billgren - Agent Provocateur in the Romantic Landscape). Kalejdoskop, Åhus 1985.
13. Oliva, Achille Bonito: Superart, Giancarlo Politi Editore, Milano 1988.
14. Madoff, Steven Henry: Modern Melancholia. Photo: Dawid, Kalejdoskop Förlag/Propexus AB, Åhus 1988.
15. During the eighties the periodical Kris has provided Swedish intellectuals with a stream of philo-

sophical and literary-critical material, the greater part of French origin but also German material. Foucault, Benjamin and Derrida have all been treated. And it was in Kris No. 23/24 that attention was drawn to the newly aroused interest in Romanticism. The *ibid.* shows were commented on in No. 25/26. (Numbers are continuous over the years.)

16. Madoff, Steven Henry: *ibid.*

17. Rehnberg, Håkan: *Vid det vindomsusade Troja (At Windswept Troy)*. Kris No. 29/30, 1984.

18. Engdahl, Horace: *Mellanrummen i det vetbaras väv. Om Maurice Blanchot (Spaces in the Knowable Weft. On Maurice Blanchot)*. Dagens Nyheter 2 July 1989.

19. Nittve, Lars in *Northern Poles*, *ibid.*

20. Wretman, Fredrik; interview in *Hype* No. 3-4, 1989-90.

21. Engblom, Sören: *Snarare forum än utsaga. Om öppenhet och ambivalens i Ernst Billgrens objekt (More Forum than Statement. On Openness and Ambivalence in Ernst Billgren's Objects)*. *Artes* No. 2 1991.

22. Ruin, Hans: *En katastrofal redogörelse - för Ulf Rollof (A Catastrophic Discourse - on Ulf Rollof)* essay in the catalogue to the show *Metafor and Materia*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm 1991.

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Essays on contemporary Swedish art.

Rune Jansson, a biography, 1987.

Curator at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, since 1990.

ForArt The Institute for Research Within International Contemporary Art, is a Norwegian independent research foundation associated with The National Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo.

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Places

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III. 6: IBID I. The Factory at Danviken, Stockholm. From the left: Håkan Rehnberg, Richard Nonas, Max Book, Johan Scott, Jan Håfström, Sven Åsberg. Photo: Sven Åsberg.

III. 7: IBID I. Jan Håfström. Photo: Sven Åsberg.

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III. 27: Fredrik Wretmann: American Floors, Moderna Museet, Stockholm 1991.