

Art *in Sweden*

*Leaving the
empty cube*

*Contemporary
Swedish art*

Sören Engblom

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though the original intentions may have paled over time. He has a very personal relationship to his works, several relate to friends and events in his life. His work at the Nordic pavilion in Venice in 1993 comprised objects structured around a box-like form that was combined with a vehicle such as a car or a locomotive, the whole of which had been covered in glossy monochrome enamel paint—sea-green, red or black. The things become familiar but unknown; natural, but enigmatic by reason of this very naturalness. The paint, deliberately chosen so as not to relate to anything in particular, transforms the objects into images and holds the disparate elements of the sculpture together. A fragile unity is created, in the same way as you might refer to your views being *coloured* by something. The blanket monochromatic painting is related by the artist himself to the *sublime* tradition, and he calls it “shadowing”. The whole work is perceived as a kind of elusive tangibility.

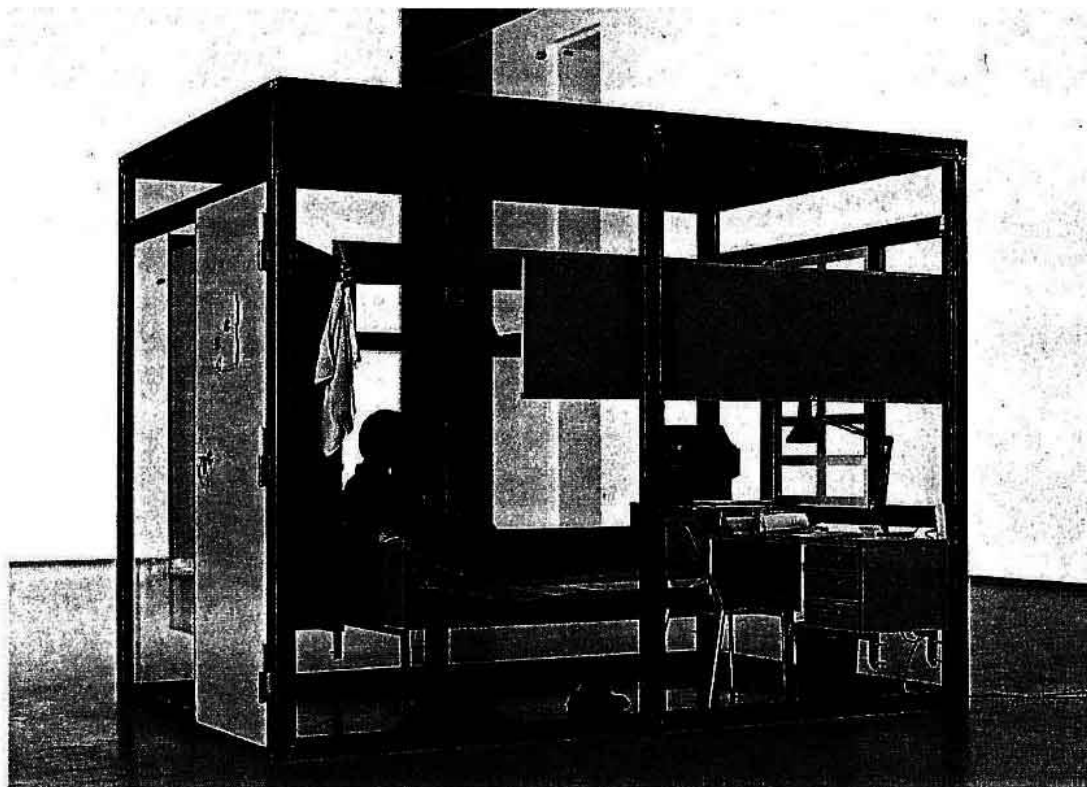
Fluxus

The many objects populating contemporary art may be understood against the background of an interest in everyday objects going back to Marcel Duchamp and perhaps also Kurt Schwitters. Both were Dadaists at the end of the first world war and the beginning of the chaotic and turbulent twenties. The art of the 1990s reveals a number of Dadaist elements—perhaps because Dadaism was the least established of all isms. Many Dada objects were also ephemeral in character, as the movement didn't produce its art for eternity. This is an appropriate approach in a time characterized by open borders, the blending of genres and techniques and an ever more comprehensive internationalization of art. Consistently enough, the trend also comprises a newly-awakened interest in the *Fluxus* movement, the most Dadaistic of the artistic currents of the 1960s. A large part of contemporary art is not concerned with objects, but rather with projects or “investiga-

tions”—not in the first instance performances in the theatrical sense of the word, but actions carrying on a tradition from the 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. Works by such artists as Elin Wikström, Lars Nilsson and the FA+ group (Ingrid Falk, Gustavo Aguerre & Friends) may be considered as investigative actions of this kind.

“As an artist, I am attracted to movements such as Fluxus and the performance art of the 1960s. Not to silent spirituality,” declares Elin Wikström (b. 1965). While studying at the Valand Department of Fine Arts at Göteborg University, she reacted against the orientation of the college and formed a “girls’ group”. “I found that I didn’t want to create yet another thing that would live for ages in a square. I wanted to work consciously with fictive situations, with stories about people.” Wikström achieved a kind of breakthrough by doing “nothing”, when she spent days lying on a bed at the ICA Malmberg supermarket in Malmö, a stone’s throw from the Rooseum. The exhibition, staged in 1993, lasted for three weeks. Eleven artists took part. Wikström created a social situation, spontaneous discussions arose in relation to the (half-) sleeping woman in the supermarket. The title of the work was “What if everybody acted that way?”

“You might say that in my art I declare war on everything utilitarian, and that the ICA work came into drastic conflict with the normal deliberate consumer activities of the supermarket...” What is involved is in fact a discussion of our way of life, our preconditions and routines. In *See how it feels*, Elin Wikström exhibited a teenager’s room with colourful balloons and herself sitting in it, bored stiff. The catalogue compared her work with civil disobedience and referred to John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s Bed-in at the Amsterdam Hilton in 1969. “A productive waste of time, as an antidote to rationality and utilitarianism.” Another of Wikström’s works, *Rebecka väntar på Anna, Anna väntar på Cecilia, Cecilia väntar på Marie* (Rebecka



Lars Nilsson. "Gå i fängelse" (Go to jail), 1995. Photo: Jan Engsmar.

with American art of the 1970s, such as that of Tehching Hsieh. In 1979 this artist had himself locked in a cell in his studio for a year. The intention was a kind of extended meditation, a journey into the artist's soul. During this time, Tehching Hsieh neither watched television, listened to the radio, read, wrote or spoke with anyone outside. This seclusion may be seen as typical of an older, more romantic attitude, indicating a journey into the self to seek one's innermost identity. Nowadays every such movement is rather outward and oriented towards media reality or to openly social encounters.

The performance art of the 1970s had an affinity to the silent rooms of poetry, and very few people actually saw these performances, which were documented in photographs. In contrast Lars Nilsson in the 1990s gets a lot of exposure—he is displayed at an exhibition and also watches TV, reads and

comes and goes as he wishes. In other words, the "normal" everyday context is operating. A movement has taken place from the intimate circles of poetry and silence in an empty room to the media exposure and social chatter of the TV age. Remarkably, the representation and public addressed today is perceived as a collective, in a time of external social individualism, while the individual inner journey of the 1970s was seen by few but undertaken in an artistic community that celebrated the collective as idea and utopia. It is in this ironic context that we observe the movement of art *leaving the empty cube* during the past 10 or 15 years.

In Sweden, the performance genre is usually associated with the body as its subject and free dance and mime as its expression and genre. Bogdan Szyber and Carina Reich (both b. 1958) are notable in this connection, with a large number of performances at unusual locations, such as *Beautiful Sadness*, which was performed at a water tower in Hjorthagen on the outskirts of Stockholm in 1989, in which the dancers hung suspended several metres up on the concrete pillars while dusk fell and Laszlo Horvath accompanied the proceedings with sad yet magnificent piano music in a romantic-lugubrious style. Szyber and Reich represent an "impure" avantgarde style with many shock effects and great personal, artistic and financial risks as recurrent ingredients in their work. Humour and abrupt stylistic collisions between expressions of solemnity and elements of popular culture are constant features in this unique mixture of dance, mime, concert and installation.

Actions, street theatre and extended, indeed global projects are part of FA+'s method of work. Ingrid Falk (b. 1960 in Stockholm) and Gustavo Aguerre (b. 1953 in Buenos Aires, Argentina) gather around them the various collaborators required by the work they are engaged on. "The Infection Project is an interdisciplinary collaborative project initiated by FA+, in which artists, doctors, researchers, philosophers, semioticians and historians of ideas

meet to make a diagnosis of the changeable status of the world around us." *Smitta* (Infection) is partly about the way in which infectious diseases spread globally and the possible chain of cause and effect hidden in this, but it is also infection as a metaphor for the way in which cultures are spread and influence each other, how languages blend and change. In *On/About Time* at the Museum of Modern Art, FA+—reinforced by Juan Castillo—showed a video from a dinner at the food chain ICA's test kitchen in Stockholm, in which historians of ideas, psychotherapists, image therapists, artists, museum specialists, art historians and others met and discussed infection in a relaxed but creative manner. Four video cameras were mounted above the table and tape recorders bugged the conversation. This all became a room with a white floor covering and white walls in the exhibition, where the edited films were projected on to a long glass table showing hands gesticulating and carrying food and drink to mouths outside the image.

FA+ staged a more aggressive action at a party hosted by the magazine *90-tal* (The nineties). Here the guests were divided into a cultural elite and a general public, after which the members of the cultural elite had to wait or were driven off because of their status. This was most certainly a shocking experience for some of them. In the *On/About Time* catalogue, FA+ concludes its presentation as follows: "Today you must be fully conscious of the way in which the art game works. First you must have fantastic ideas, and then you must question, harry and criticize them as much as you can. When ideas have got to be carried out you need discipline. We have carried out 17 projects, and it's worked so far. The street is our most important gallery. It's simple, but not easy. It's FA+."

The Dada legacy

As early as what is now known as pre-pop, that is to say the art of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns or Claes Oldenburg around 1960, the legacy of Dada and particularly of Marcel Duchamp may be clearly seen (which is not to say that Duchamp can only be defined as a Dadaist—on the other hand Dada is a very comprehensive term). As far as the art of the past twenty or thirty years is concerned, the general picture is dominated by the legacy of pop art and minimalism, as was most recently demonstrated in the overview exhibition at the Rooseum *Mer eller mindre—popkonst och minimalism från Louisiana och Moderna Museet* (More or less—pop art and minimalism from Louisiana and the Museum of Modern Art), 1995.

While pop art got off to a flying start in Sweden thanks to exhibitions like *4 amerikanare* (4 Americans) and *Amerikansk popkonst—106 former av kärlek och förtvivlan* (American pop art—106 forms of love and despair) at the Museum of Modern Art in 1962 and 1964, minimalism had no launch of comparable impact. In addition, the Swedish art world became more and more provincial in the 1970s, despite visits by important international artists like Joseph Beuys and Öyvind Fahlström, and deeply original artists on home ground such as Dick Bengtsson (1936-1987), the media essentially preferred to focus on the theatre and on works of art with an explicitly political orientation and in general on domestic cultural conflicts. When the 1980s, with their more open climate, turned their gaze outwards, the first result was a wave of American art from the 1970s. It is perhaps in this connection that the minimalist or more precisely the post-minimalist breakthrough occurred in Sweden (as described above in relation to Jan Håfström and the *Ibid.* exhibitions). Subsequently, when institutions and media at last began to show an interest in postmodernism, as manifested in Sweden in the *Implosion* exhibition at the Museum of

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What trends are reflected in the Swedish art of the past ten years?

Which artists have set their stamp on the period, who have been most visible and where have they been seen?

In this panoramic survey of contemporary Swedish art, Sören Engblom, from a vantage point at the heart of the Swedish art world, introduces the reader to the most controversial and exciting arts and artists of recent years. His account is based on conversations with artists, critics and museum professionals as well as studies of art criticism and reviews in the media.

The book also contains a presentation of art colleges, art funding, art publications and the leading exhibition locations in Sweden.

Sören Engblom, born in 1950, studied art, drama, music and literature at Stockholm University in the 1970s, and was active as an art and music critic with the evening newspaper *Expressen* during the 1980s. Since 1990 he has been a curator at the Modern Museum in Stockholm, where he has been responsible for exhibitions showcasing mainly Swedish art.

In addition to articles in the press, essays in various cultural magazines and chronicles in yearbooks, Sören Engblom has written a general survey of Swedish art in the 1980s—*From Interspaces and Broken Metaphors* as well as monographs on the artists Rune Jansson and KG Nilsson.



ISBN 91-520-0500-3



9 789152 005002