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## Art and Politics since 1950

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## Art and Politics since 1950

*Björn Fritz*

Sweden in the 1950s and Sweden today are very different places in many ways. In the following, I will discuss the intersections between art and politics in Sweden during that time span, but it is important to emphasize that this is only one of many aspects of the history of the period. One might just as well trace shifts emanating from changes in art education, in intensified contacts with the rest of the world, and in aesthetic choices. By making my choice of perspective, many deserving artists will be left out of my essay, but on the upside, such a choice allows me to explore the development of Swedish society in close connection to the art it produces.

Sweden kept a mostly neutral stance through the Second World War, so when rationing and travel restrictions were lifted in the beginning of the 1950s all was set for a prosperous return to a peacetime society. The Social Democratic Party (Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetarparti) that had been the ruling party almost continuously since 1920, and would remain in power until 1976, was continuing its project of modernization and the development of a social security system for all citizens. The years from 1950 until 1973 are often thought of as a modern 'golden age' due to the fact that almost all Swedes saw an increase in wealth and available social services (such as free schools, free universities, free medical support, and old age pensions). This was made possible by a general upturn in the economy after the Second World War and by the availability of very cheap energy in the form of oil. This would last until the beginning of the 1970s, at which time several economic factors, especially the oil crisis of 1973 and the American stock market crash that same year, would put an end to this unrivalled economic growth and dispersion of wealth among all of Swe-

den's citizens. The most visible problem during this golden age was the need to build new homes for a growing and more urbanised population as well as rebuilding existing cities to accommodate increased car traffic.

## 1950s: public art and one photographer

The Swedish art scene during the 1950s was mostly dominated by what had taken place before the war, and artists working within the framework of Concretism (Konkretisterna) or Surrealism (Imaginsterna) were the major players. Although they were working mainly with art for art's sake-related formal problems, it should be noted that this type of modern art became a very important symbol for modernity as well as progress of the time, especially through public art created by artists such as Lennart Rodhe, Olle Bonniér, Karl Axel Pehrson, Pierre Olofsson, Randi Fisher, and Arne Jones. Public art in Sweden became a building block in the construction of a modern mass society, and it was aimed at pleasing the general viewer and improving everyday life for all.

One photographer during this era stands out as the most progressive and forward looking – *Christer Strömholm* (1918–2002). After a time as a student of well known Swedish art teachers such as Otte Sköld and Isaac Grünewald, he became a photographer who travelled the world and photographed its less seen sides. The best known of these images are those he took of transsexual women at Place Blanche in Paris during the 1950s and 1960s. In these, as well as many of his other photographs, there is an unlikely combination of snapshot, portrait photography, and documentary style that sets him apart as one of the greatest Swedish photographers of all times (fig. 194). His documentary style, where he photographed these marginalized women from within their own community and together with them, was very far removed from the general Swedish views on transsexuality, homosexuality, and prostitution in the 1950s. Sweden had its own version of the American McCarthy witch-hunts in the form of the Hajby and Keyne political scandals (Mr. Kurt Hajby's alleged love affair with Gustav V, the king of Sweden, was at the centre of the scandals). Strömholm's photographs were not shown to the general public until the publication of the book *Les Amies de Place Blanche* in 1983 and in his retrospec-



Figure 194 Christer Strömholm, *'Gina & Nana'* from *'Place Blanche'* in *Les Amies de Place Blanche*, 1963. © Bildverksamheten Strömholm.

tive exhibition at Moderna Museet (the Museum of Modern art in Stockholm) in 1986. The images then became an important inspiration for many Swedish artists interested in questions of gender, sexuality, and identity, and Strömholm became an influential teacher at his School of Photography in Stockholm between 1962 and 1972.

### 1960s: Playful protests and Moderna Museet

The sixties were a time of great change in Sweden, as elsewhere in the world. The designer *Lena Larsson* (1919–2000) can be seen as an example of how old traditions were cast aside and modernity was embraced; she suggested that families should spend more time together and less time taking care of household chores. Buying new and throwing it away when it was worn out would be more sensible than countless women wasting

their lives with mending and washing up the dishes (yes, she did suggest paper plates and cups at the kitchen table).

Moderna Museet opened in 1958. Pontus Hultén (1924–2006) was its director from 1960 until 1973, and he produced many highly influential exhibitions that in turn changed the Swedish art scene. Noteworthy shows had themes such as American Art, Pop Art, Movement in Art, and the remarkable installation of French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle's large female sculpture *She*, which the audience entered through the vagina in order to take part in the exhibition inside her body. American artists Edward Kienholz, Andy Warhol, and Robert Rauschenberg all had separate shows, and these kept the Swedish audiences in touch with contemporary, mostly American, art.

The exhibition *Movement in Art* (Rörelse i konsten) in 1961, included mobiles, motorized sculptures, happenings, and performances. One art critic who disapproved of the playfulness of the kinetic art wondered sarcastically if the nearby amusement park Gröna Lund had reopened at the museum. While the exhibition was a joint venture with the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam and the Louisiana museum of Modern Art in Denmark and mostly showed international art, one Swede was represented – *P O Ultvedt* (1927–2006). His playful machines, often with humorous or sarcastic titles, showed very little respect for the institution of High Art and instead appealed to the viewer's more childlike and playful sides (fig. 195). In hindsight, this show at Moderna Museet seems like a starting point for a livelier and far less self-conscious art scene in Sweden, opening it up to new forms of expression such as installation and performance. Art could be playful and political at the same time, and many artists took the chance to provoke and challenge society, the audience, and any perceived expectations of what art ought to be.

Öyvind Fahlström (1928–1976) created maps of the world explaining the political structures of the times and made installations where the audience was invited to rearrange the pieces in them (compare Max Liljefors' essay on Fahlström in this book). The anarcho-feminist artist *Monica Sjöö* (1938–2005) caused a scandal with her painting *God Giving Birth* in which God was depicted as a black woman giving birth (fig. 196). *Carl Johan de Geer* (b. 1938) produced several provocative posters such as his anti-nation-



Figure 195 P O Ultvedt, *The Fly Swatter* (Flugsmällan), 1962, mixed materials, 51 x 71 x 39 cm. Moderna Museet, Stockholm. © P O Ultvedt/BUS.

alistic statement with the Swedish flag together with the text 'Desecrate the flag, refuse to bear arms, betray your country, be anti-nationalistic' as well as the word 'COCK' written on the flag itself (fig. 197). De Geer was also an editor of *Lars Hillersberg's* (1934–2004) satirical magazine *PUSS*, and he produced several, often quite odd, television programmes for children. It seemed like art and artist were involved everywhere, shaping the look and content of Swedish sixties culture. *Sture Johannessson* (1935–2018) made another scandalous poster in 1968 for the show 'Underground' at Lund's Art Gallery (Lunds Konshall); the poster prominently featured a naked woman smoking an odd pipe with a cannabis leaf, a painting by Eugene Delacroix, a multitude of small pictures of Che Guevara, and the motto 'Revolution Means Revolutionary Consciousness' (fig. 198). This poster upset local politicians who cancelled the exhibition, and the director of Lund's Art Gallery, Folke Edwards, was fired. Politics and drugs were controversial subjects, and so was sex. *Peter Dahl* (b. 1934) exhibited his

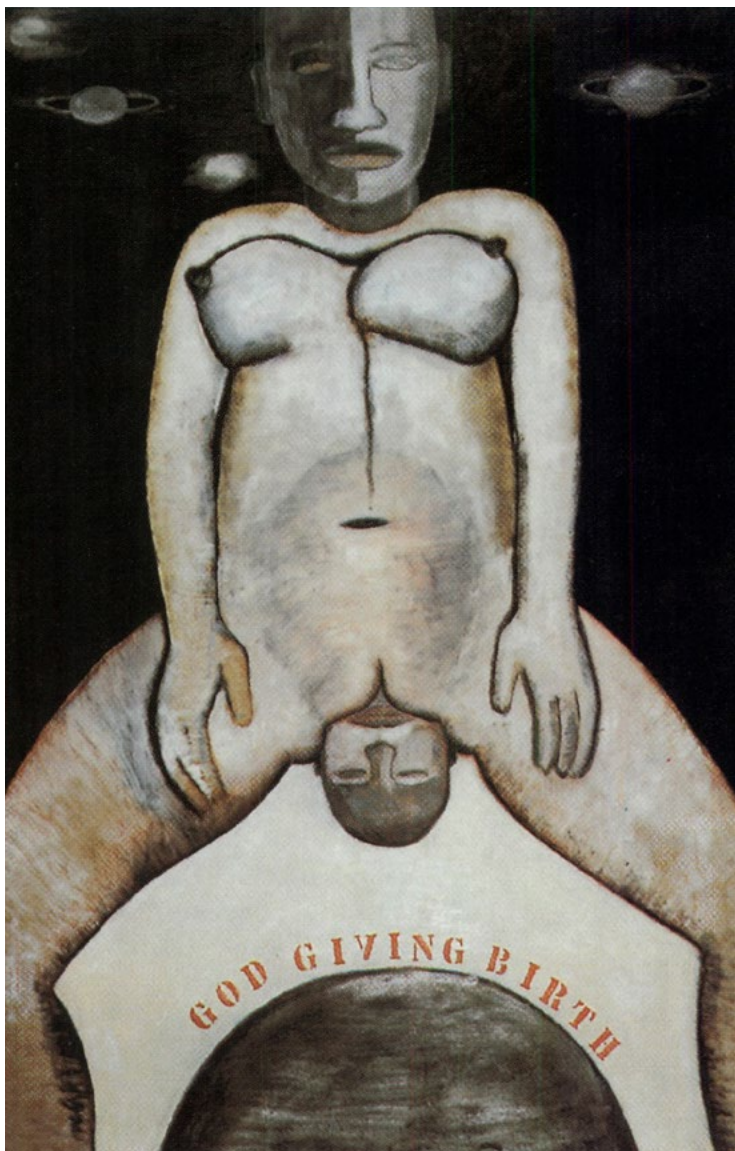


Figure 196 Monica Sjöö, *God giving Birth*, 1968, oil on canvas. MAN:s konstsamling. © Monica Sjöö.



Figure 197 Carl Johan de Geer, *Desecrate the Flag* (Skända Flaggan), 1967, silkscreen, 69,5 x 49,5 cm. © Carl Johan de Geer.



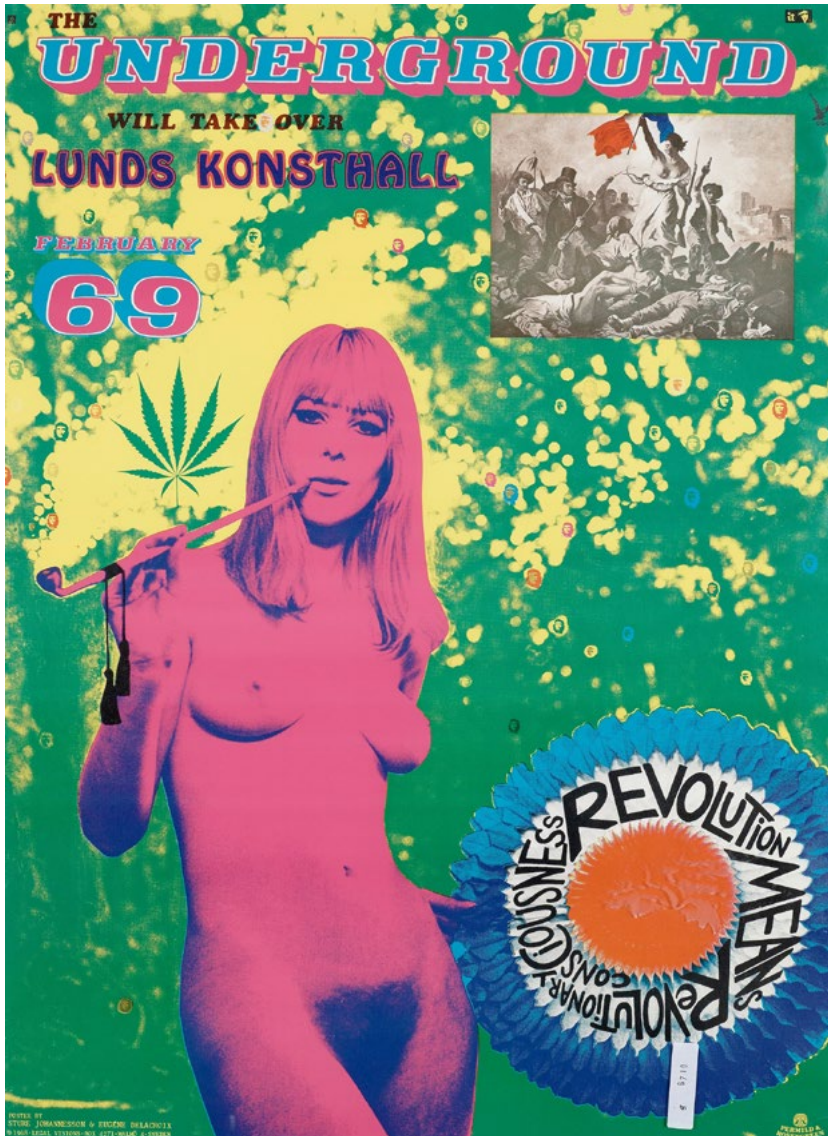


Figure 198 Sture Johannesson, *Revolution means revolutionary consciousness*, 1968, offset lithography, 62,2 x 85,1 cm, 1968. © Sture Johannesson/BUS.

*The Liberal Breakthrough in Society* (Liberalismens genombrott i societeten) in 1970, in which a man prominently shows his erect penis to a woman who in turn lifts up her skirts and looks a lot like Princess Sibylla (who was a member of the royal family), (fig. 199). This painting, as well as the de Geer poster mentioned above, was confiscated by the police when showed for the first time. This of course generated publicity and curiosity and made the artist well known all over Sweden.

Although the 1960s were economically prosperous years for most Swedes, political unrest was growing, and this was expressed through art that challenged conventions and popular beliefs. At the same time, we should note that these changes in the art movement of the time mostly



Figure 199 Peter Dahl, *The Liberal Breakthrough in Society* (Liberalismens genombrott i societeten), 1970, oil on canvas, 92 x 100 cm. Gothenburg Museum of Art, Gothenburg.  
© Peter Dahl/BUS.

concerned the subject matter of the art, not the formal or technical aspects. With the exceptions of Öyvind Fahlström and P O Ultvedt, most Swedish art was well within the realm of classic painting or graphic design. There was initially outrage against art that was seen as indecent or romanticizing drugs, but this subsided. The sixties were all in all a time of happy protest and playful jabs at old conventions, and the participants in the art scene were to be highly influential long after the decade was over. Fahlström soon became one of the internationally best-known Swedish artists, and he developed close ties with the Situationist movement in France. Sjöo moved to the UK and worked for most of her career there. Carl Johan de Geer, who is still an influential writer and artist, was a big part of the design collective 10-gruppen and worked for Swedish television. Dahl became a member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Kungl. Akademien för de fria konsterna) and was widely popular with his illustrations of the Swedish 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Bellman's songs. Sture Johannesson pioneered computer art in Sweden in the 1980s and got a second chance to show at Lund's Art Gallery with *Counterclockwise Circumambulation* in 2004. It prominently showed hemp plants (though not of the cannabis-producing variety) and was once more closed, temporarily, and destroyed (according to Johannesson) by the police.

## 1970s: Vietnam and other revolutions

As the sixties turned into the seventies, there was a change in spirit. Demonstrations against the Vietnam War were common and brought with them a wider interest in global political issues. The oil crisis of 1973 and its precursor the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East started an economic recession in many parts of the world, including Sweden. Large industrial companies started to move production from Sweden to countries with cheaper wages and lower taxes, and there was an emerging understanding of ecological problems that initially came to focus on the fight against the use of nuclear energy. The future suddenly seemed a bit gloomier, and this was perhaps most visible in a changed understanding of the Swedish housing programme, where the goal of building a million new homes from 1965 to 1975 that at the beginning was met with enthusiasm now was seen as just pro-



Figure 200 Gerhard Nordström, *Summer 1970* (Sommaren 1970), 1972, oil on panel, 190 x 435 cm. Dep. Jönköpings länsmuseum. © Gerhard Nordström/BUS.

ducing horrible grey concrete high-rises full of problems. In the elections in 1976, Sweden got its first non-socialist government in many years. It should be said that the perceived gloominess of 1976 was to a large extent perception and not reality; Sweden was (and still is) one of the wealthiest countries in the world with a large system of social securities for its citizens, but gloom and protest was at times an important theme in Swedish art.

*Gerhard Nordström* (b. 1925), for instance, made many comments on the Vietnam War and military practices in general. These are perhaps most chillingly visualized in the series of paintings called *Summer 1970* (Sommaren 1970) done in 1972. Here large landscapes depict Swedish summer days – green lush nature and picnicking Swedes – but around the edges of these landscapes are large heaps of bloody, mutilated bodies placed as depicted in the widely photographed and publicized My Lai massacre (fig. 200). These are both calm and brutal pictures, juxtaposing Swedish summer and war atrocities within a shared landscape and thus bringing the meaning of war back home.

Many artists commented on phenomena closer to home. *Peter Tillberg's* (1946–2016) large painting of school children in a dull grey spacious classroom, each one of them alone at their benches looking straight forward with muted, greyish, and dull facial expressions does not paint a happy image of Swedish childhood (fig. 201), and neither does the title *Are you cost effective, little one?* (Blir du lönsam lille vän?).





Figure 201 Peter Tillberg, *Are you cost effective, little one?* (Blir du lönsam lille vän?), 1971, oil on canvas, 197 x 316 cm. Moderna Museet, Stockholm. © Peter Tillberg/BUS.

More nuanced and varied takes on the relations between parents and children can be seen in *Lena Cronqvist's* (b. 1938) work, where she from the early seventies and onward has dealt with issues concerning herself and her various family relations – from a post-partum psychosis to the death of her parents. Her subject matter might originate in her private experiences, but her images transcend the private to address the general human subjects of relations, family, and mortality, all painted in a direct and somewhat naive manner that makes the often-harsh subject matter more accessible for the viewer (fig. 202). *Marie Louise Ekman* (b. 1944) paints in a similar naive style, although clearly more influenced by comic books. Her paintings focus on similar subject matter too – such as family and social relations – but with a significantly more pronounced feminist viewpoint and a great love for the absurd and grotesque (fig. 203). Her 1976 movie *Hallo Baby* paints a bleak picture of the life of a female artist in the male-dominated art world of Stockholm. The same kind of happy exaggerations and comic effects that are an important part of her paintings can be seen here, and the movie (one of many she has made since then) functions as a comment on her own work.



Figure 202 Lena Cronqvist, *The Mother* (Modern), 1975, Norrköpings Konstmuseum, Norrköping. © Lena Cronqvist/BUS.



Figure 203 Marie-Louise Ekman, *No title (Inez Svensson)* (Utan titel (Inez Svensson)), 1973, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 61 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Bukowskis. © Marie-Louise Ekman/BUS.



Figure 204 Kjartan Slettemark, *Entering himself as a work of art at Liljevalchs spring salon of 1975*. © Kjartan Slettemark/BUS.

Comic absurdity was also the choice of *Kjartan Slettemark* (1932–2008), a Norwegian artist often active in Sweden. He travelled around the world with a passport with his own picture replaced by one of Richard Nixon (closely associated with the Vietnam War at the time). He handed himself in as an art object to the spring salon at Liljevalchs Art Gallery in 1975, dressed in a poodle costume (fig. 204). He was inspected and rejected. He showed up at the opening of Malmö Art Gallery (Malmö Konsthall) in the following year in the same poodle costume and attempted to bite the feet of the art critic Olle Granath. The intended message was to show that the art world makes poodles of all artists, taking the individuality, freedom, and edge away from any artistic expression. However, not even Slettemark's performances could avoid this, and the poodle costume is today part of Moderna Museet's collection.

Some artists took to the alternative leftist movements in Sweden and helped shape their visual environments. Demonstrations, posters, record covers, and satirical or political drawing became an important part of how the century was perceived. *Gittan Jönsson's* (b. 1948) painting of a happy woman destroying pots and pans and Lars Hillersberg's reworking of Carl XVI Gustaf's motto into a suggestion that he should commit suicide *For Sweden Out of Time* (För Sverige ur tiden), a play with the king's newly chosen motto, are both very typical of such work (fig. 205).

The seventies were indeed a very politicized decade in which art was often judged by its moral content, and ABBA winning the Eurovision song contest in 1974 was more likely to cause a storm of indignation than the public suggestion that the king ought to shoot himself. In the 1979 election, Sweden was back in the hands of the Social Democratic Party and its leader Olof Palme, but the times were changing fast. Neoliberalism, free market economies, and post-modernism would rapidly make the idealism of the seventies seem as dated as the colourful batik-dyed fabrics of the time.

## 1980s: Yuppies and postmodernism

The 1980s are often seen as the decade of post-modernism, a return to making visibly striking art often by re-using images from art history, contemporary culture, and advertising – subjects that were seen as low and





Figure 205 Lars Hillersberg, *For Sweden Out of Time* (För Sverige ur tiden), 1968, lithography, 42 x 30 cm. © Lars Hillersberg/BUS.

commercial in the 1970s. This was very much in line with a political shift in Sweden (and the rest of the world) at the time; the social democratic hegemony had been broken, and an era of neo-liberalism was beginning to make its mark on the cultural landscape.

Initially, this can be understood as a move away from socially engaged art towards a fascinated look upon the market side of the art world. This fascination should not be understood just as a revolt against socially concerned art of the 1970s and an embrace of the market, liberalism, and the sudden upswing in the art market at large, but also as an exploration of the art system itself. Behind this turn towards a post-modern aesthetic theory were two major forces. The first was a general change in the art world where the shift towards post-modernism had been under way since the 1960s and made its very visible debut in Sweden in the early 1980s. Post-modernism was first understood as (German) neo-expressionism and a return to painting on canvas and a closer look at the art history of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This meant that a painter such as *Max Book* (b. 1953), who was experimenting with expressionistic painting and various collage techniques that just a few years earlier would have been introverted and out of touch with the times, became one of the most visible and influential artists of the 1980s (fig. 206). The second force behind the post-modern breakthrough was the economic upturn of the 1980s, often referred to as the yuppie era in which many young entrepreneurs (mostly in the financial sector) made it big and wanted to spend their new income on, among other things, art. Due to tax reasons, art was a very good investment at the time, and the majority of the art market dealt in second-hand sales of old Swedish masters, including Anders Zorn, Bruno Liljefors, and Carl Larsson, which were all seen as safe investments. Reports in the media on the increasing prices of art brought with it a general interest in both historical and contemporary art, and when post-modernism in Sweden came to incorporate not only neo-expressionistic painting but also the more theory-heavy art dealing with contemporary visual culture and aesthetic theories, it created a very visible market for contemporary art as a luxury good. This occurred rather quickly and abruptly in Sweden – from a socially active art scene discussing social and political issues to a market-driven art scene heralding the artist as a star who pro-



Figure 206 Max Book, *Lott/Lot*, 1985–1986, oil on canvas, 210 x 300 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Bukowskis. © Max Book/BUS.

duced luxury objects that were talked about and explained through a theory-heavy and at times very obscure discourse.

In this climate, some of the artists of previous generations again found themselves at the centre of attention. *Jan Håfström* (b. 1937), who made his debut in 1966, used images of Mr. Walker (from the comic book *The Phantom*) as well as other pop-cultural references in his paintings, a practice that suddenly was very close to post-modern ideas of appropriation and reuse of images (fig. 207). *Ola Billgren* (1940–2001) got his big breakthrough with successful shows in Stockholm at the beginning of the 1980s, although he had been working in a photo-realist style since the mid-1960s. In the eighties, he introduced expressionistic themes into his paintings and thus produced not only visibly pleasing and highly sellable art but also images that were very much in touch with the academic interest in art history and the visual vocabularies of older art (fig. 208).

It should come as no surprise that in this new environment of market and theory-driven art, quite a few young artists would emerge from the art



Figure 207 Jan Håfström, *Mr Walker*, 2009, oil on panel, 100 x 100 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Bukowskis. © Jan Håfström/BUS.

schools and into the galleries. *Truls Melin* (b. 1958) worked with sculptures as if they were constructions in architecture or design; common objects such as boats, planes, and the human figure are treated as objects and placed within frameworks, often quite literally, and the sculpture's presence as an object is made more striking by its machinelike monochrome lacquer (fig. 209). Often these objects give the impression of children's toys that are made into sculpture through a dreamlike incorporation with other objects and construction materials. *Cecilia Edefalk* (b. 1954) undertook the same re-contextualization within painting. Her group of paintings *Another Movement* (*En annan rörelse*, 1990) is in many ways the archetyp-



Figure 208 Ola Billgren, *Painting* (Målning), 1967, oil on panel, 62 x 95 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Bukowskis. © Ola Billgren/BUS.



Figure 209 Truls Melin, *The Dream Ship* (Drömskeppet), 2006, painted cardboard, 48 x 100 x 30 cm. Skissernas Museum, Lund. © Truls Melin/BUS.



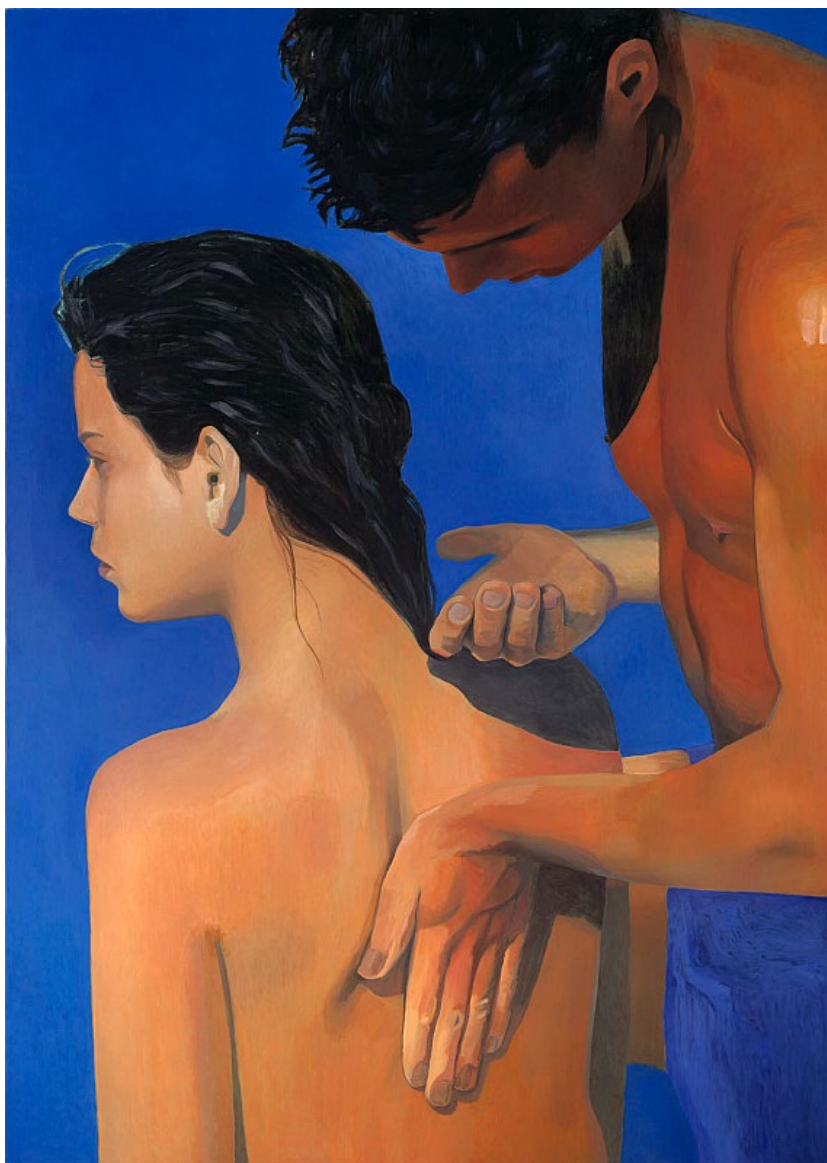


Figure 210 Cecilia Edefalk, *Another Movement* (En annan rörelse), 1990, oil on canvas, 238,5 x 171 cm. Photo: Parallan Allsten, Moderna Museet, Stockholm. © Cecilia Edefalk.



Figure 211 Lars Vilks, *Nimis*, 1980–. © Lars Vilks.

ical 1980s image; it is based on a picture from an advertisement, and the background has been replaced by a solid blue colour field that makes the orange bodies pop out of the image (fig. 210). The visual subject is a man applying suntan lotion to a seated woman's back. Both persons are turned away from the viewer, and the bottle with the lotion is 'missing' in the centre of the image. The painting was shown as several copies of various sizes at the same time, a way of working Edefalk has used many times. *Another Movement* sums up many things about art in the 1980s in Sweden; it is visually stunning, it connects to art history (Photorealism of the 1960s as well as Surrealism of the 1930s), and it is playful while at the same time highlighting a kind of under-articulated social angst.

Although post-modern culture in general was in sync with a neoliberalist society, there were a few artists in opposition, and in hindsight they did point towards what was to come. One such artist is *Lars Vilks* (b. 1946), who's installation *Nimis* at Kullaberg nature reserve became a long and vivid story about artistic freedom, nature preservation, and ownership (he sold *Nimis* first to the German artist Joseph Beuys and, after Beuys' death, resold it to Bulgarian-American artist Christo Javacheff to prevent its dem-

olition). The sculpture/installation/building is a large irregular structure built out of driftwood and was begun in 1980 (fig. 211). It became a popular tourist attraction thanks to all the publicity it got when local politicians wanted to remove it from the nature preserve, where all construction was banned even if it was labelled art. *Nimis* has been partially destroyed by nature and fire, but it is constantly being rebuilt and improved on, and it still stands in place today as a sign that art can sometimes transcend the law.

*Ingrid Orfali's* (b. 1952) large-scale cibachrome photographs can be seen as typical of another development at the time (fig. 212). She used literary content, allegory and everyday objects (such as an iron, lipstick, or a tampon) in beautiful glossy close-ups to construct a complex feminist critique of culture at large. Feminist issues played an important role on the international postmodern art scene, but it would take until the 1990s before they became a common theme in Sweden too.

## 1990s: Feminism and GLBT visibility

As mentioned above, the 1980s were an economically prosperous time, mainly due to growth in sectors dealing with finance and construction. The 1990s saw that bubble burst, and the decade began with a recession that slowly turned into a new financial bubble, this time driven by tech industries and what became known as the Internet bubble. That bubble



Figure 212 Ingrid Orfali, *La chute d'Ariadne*, 1986, cibachrome, 101 x 101 cm. Moderna Museet, Stockholm. © Ingrid Orfali/BUS.



burst at the end of the decade and recession was back again. Thus the nineties were a decade of fast changes, troubled economies, and the emergence of Internet technologies that would change society in many ways. It was also the time for identity politics, where women, homosexuals, and people of colour demanded to be seen on equal terms. Such developments were as visible within the arts as in politics, sometimes so much so that art itself seemed to produce change.

Most visibly and politically effectual were the twelve large-scale photographs by *Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin* (b. 1961) forming the exhibition *Ecce Homo* (1998). The photographs depict classical situations in the life of Christ, but they are staged in contemporary settings with obviously gay and lesbian models – naked, in leather gear, transvestites, HIV-positive, etc. The exhibition was first shown in Uppsala Cathedral and later went on tour around the country. It was even shown in the Swedish Parliament. As expected, there was a fair deal of outcry from conservative Christians, there were demonstrations (for and against the exhibition), and there were even physical attacks on the photographs. In the end, the photographs, with their easily understood re-imagining of well-known themes paired with tantalizing otherness caused a great deal of debate. However, out of that came a greater visibility and understanding of GLBT issues.

Reimagining and reinterpreting canonical works of art history is a typical postmodern trope, and it was used by several artists at the time. *Annikar Karlsson Rixon* (b. 1962) is a photographer often concerned with questions of gender and identity. When she reimagines Scandinavian turn of the century paintings into a modern context, *Peder Krøyer's* (1851–1909) *Artists' Luncheon at Brøndum's Hotel* (Ved frokosten) with its all-male cast becomes a contemporary lunch with Karlsson Rixon's female friends striking similar poses (fig. 213 and 214). The transformations in play here – from oil painting to photography, from 1883 to 1997, from male to female – are contrasted with the similarities of pose, dinner setting, social interactions, joy, and light. The juxtaposition is not an easy comment on gender, but rather an elaborate comparison that sheds some light on change and differences concerning the gendered role of the artist as well as on art history.

*Annika von Hausswolff* (b. 1967) also works with photography and with questions of gender and identity. In her 1993 series of images titled *Back to*



Figure 213 (left) Annica Karlsson Rixon, *The Artists' Luncheon*, 1997, c-print, 82 x 61 cm. Photo: Bukowskis. © Annica Karlsson Rixon.

Figure 214 (right) Peder Krøyer, *Artists' Luncheon at Brøndum's Hotel (Ved frokosten)*, 1883, oil on canvas, 67,5 x 76,5 cm. Art Museum of Skagen.

*Nature*, she staged images based on crime-scene photography (fig. 215). The cold and precise images of female bodies in Swedish nature evoke images from another Swedish artist from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Anders Zorn. Zorn is famous for his many paintings of nude young women bathing out in streams and lakes, combining landscape and the nude into an archetypical image of young, natural, beautiful Swedish sensuality (fig. 216). Interestingly he quite often used photography in his preliminary sketching of his paintings. The nude women in von Hausswolff's nature occupy the same space and display the same bodies as in Zorn's paintings, but they are obviously violated. There are no longer any traces of either happiness or sensuality left; instead, she displays a far more sinister take on femininity and nature in Sweden in the 1990s.

Yet another artist of the same decade working within the same realm of nature and historical painting was *Matts Leiderstam* (b. 1956). In his series *Returned* (1997–2001), he returned paintings (actually copies of French 17<sup>th</sup>



Figure 215 Annika von Hausswolff, from *Back to Nature*, 1993, c-print, 43 x 60,5 cm.  
© Annika von Hausswolff.

century artist Nicholas Poussin's *Spring or Earthly Paradise*) to their mythological place of origin in different parks and photographed them in this setting (fig. 217). He then left the paintings so that other visitors to the park could take them. The parks and the spaces within them that he chose were not random places, but cruising spots, places where men would meet for casual sex. The setting of the images was in their own way an earthly paradise like the one Poussin once painted. This too means that Leiderstam's paintings most likely ended up on the walls of gay men, just as his photographs of the paintings ended up in the gallery. This very public acknowledgement of casual and anonymous outdoor gay sex as a part of our culture was yet another way of weaving together images, art history, and identities into a comment on contemporary society.

There were other men examining the male gender role in Sweden in the 1990s. *Magnus Wallin* (b. 1965) made videogame-based computer animations dealing with bodies, anatomy, and disabilities (fig. 218). *Peter Johansson* (b. 1964) disarmed the heroic male artist by weaving an intricate artistic world around his own body, *dalahästar* (small wooden horses painted



Figure 216 Anders Zorn, *The Skiff* (Jollen), oil on canvas, 100 × 64 cm. Private Collection. Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.





Figure 217 Matts Leiderstam, *Returned*, Hampstead Heath, London, 1997, c-print, 19 x 18,5 cm. © Matts Leiderstam/BUS.



Figure 218 Magnus Wallin, still from video *Elements*, 2011. © Magnus Wallin/BUS.



Figure 219 Peter Johansson, *El Hombre Elastico, my friend the sausage* (El Hombre Elastico, min vän korven), invitation card, 2016. © Peter Johansson/BUS.

with ornamental flowers, usually sold as tourist souvenirs), and *falukorv* (a type of cheap Swedish sausage), (fig. 219). *Lars Tunbjörk* (1956–2015) made photographic collages dealing with Swedishness (for more on Tunbjörk, see Moa Petersén's essay in this book). These artists were describing new, less heroic, and more human male positions and placing them in unconventional contexts.

The two most visible artists of the decade were *Dan Wolgers* (b. 1955) and *Ernst Billgren* (b. 1957), and their work was typically representative of the 1990s. However, because they were both un-interested in political themes, their work falls outside the scope of this essay.

## 2000 and beyond: Identity politics

The connection between the personal and the political was not only possible but also a very successful idea for some of the artists emerging during the new millennium. They would make this their chosen arena, causing both scandals and discussions. Economic and political change maintained their rapid pace in the years following the collapse of the Internet bubble. Banking and real estate once more got the economic wheels turning, this



Figure 220 Dror Feiler and Gunilla Sköld-Feiler, *Snow White and The Madness of Truth*, temporary installation at the Museum of History, Stockholm, 2004. © Dror Feiler and Gunilla Sköld-Feiler.

time in a system that thanks to computerized trading affected the whole world simultaneously and very rapidly, but this system too crashed at the same time as the collapse of the Lehman Brothers investment firm in 2008. Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the growth of EU both became prominent political issues.

At times, these developments led to political skirmishes. The Israeli ambassador, Zvi Mazel, attacked and agitated against *Snow White and The Madness of Truth* (fig. 220) by Dror Feiler (b. 1951) and his wife Gunilla Sköld-Feiler (b. 1953). The installation, on display at the Swedish History Museum in 2004, dealt with the Israel-Palestine conflict, and central to it was a small ship with a sail made out of a photograph of a Palestinian suicide bomber, Hanadi Jarada, in a basin full of red water. Feiler, himself Jewish and born in Isra-



Figure 221 Anna Odell, *Unknown, woman 2009-349701*, still from video of performance/re-enactment, 2009. © Anna Odell/BUS.

el and a prominent pro-Palestine activist, has said that the idea was to draw attention to the conflict and the cruelty of it all. Mr. Mazel did not agree and saw it as an attack on Israel. The artwork ignited some heated debates between various voices in Sweden and Israel, and it became the focus of conspiracy theories about why the artwork was attacked at the time.

In 2009 another performance act came to ignite a heated debate about the limits and purposes of art when *Anna Odell* (b. 1973), as part of her studies at Konstfack (University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm), reconstructed her own psychological breakdown back in 1995 at a central bridge in Stockholm (Liljeholmsbron), complete with the intervention of unknowing police and healthcare personnel, filmed it, and showed the resulting film as a work of art – *Unknown, Woman 2009-349701* (fig. 221). Odell's purpose was to show how our society handles mental health issues, but the debate was mostly focused on her wasting hospital resources. Odell was fined 2500 SEK, but this got her career off to a great start, and she was



later praised for her movie *The Reunion* (2013) in which she re-enacts her own class reunion using herself along with professional actors.

The intersection of identity and ethnicity has not been a usual theme in Swedish art, but there are a few artists who have made it a central part of their work in recent years. The best known of these artists is surely *Makode Linde* (b. 1981) whose ongoing *Afromantics* series puts grotesque and graphic blackface on many different kinds of objects and images. His most controversial work to date was *Painful Cake* (2012), (fig. 222). Several artists were invited to each submit a cake for an event organized by the Swedish Artists' Association (Konstnärernas Riksorganisation, KRO) to celebrate their 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Linde's cake had a body looking like a black version of the Willendorf Venus and Linde's own head made up in blackface make-up. Each time someone cut the cake, he screamed (a lot). A video clip showing Lena Adelsohn-Liljeroth (at the time minister of culture) cutting a piece of cake and feeding it to Linde went viral, instantly shaping a very aggressive debate about gender, blackness, and art. The sides in this debate were many, and were mostly unwavering. Linde is a young, black, Swedish, gay man, Adelsohn-Liljeroth is an older and well established white female politician,



Figure 222 Makode Linde, *Painful Cake*, still from performance, 2012. © Makode Linde/BUS.

and his cake depicted a bleeding and screaming caricature of a black woman. Many voices were very critical of the event – the National League of AfroSwedes (Afrosvenskarnas Riksförbund) was insulted by the blackface, several feminist critics focused on the gender of the cake and the act of cutting and eating it, and a lot of the critique seemed focused on the conservative political views of Lena Adelsohn-Liljeroth.

Other recent takes on ethnicity include *Lisa Vipola's* (b. 1982) fake re-makes of Sami crafts in 2014. Vipola is not part of the Sami community (the Sami are the indigenous population of the Scandinavian north), but grew up close to it. She is not trained in Sami handicraft, but made imitations in modern materials and showed them as *Sami Duodij* [True Sami Craft], drawing the wrath of some commentators within the Sami community as well as accusations of plagiarism (fig. 223). Both Linde and Vipola work within a complicated web of ethnic identities among minorities in Sweden, and their work is vital in exploring this area. Highly visible and loud multiculturalism is fairly new to Sweden, so it is no wonder that art should be part of the discussions surrounding it.

Questions regarding Swedishness, otherness, and ethnicity have certainly become more important than ever, and Sweden is in no way shielded from the ongoing nationalistic and protective ideologies that have blos-



Figure 223 Lisa Vipola, *Sami Duodij*, detail of object, 2014. © Lisa Vipola/BUS.

somed in numerous countries in recent years. Sweden itself has rarely been a topic of the art discussed in this essay, and when it has been the purpose has often been parodic, as with the work of de Geer and Hillersberg. The most poignant work that concerns itself with Sweden, but without political or nationalistic connotations, is the multipart project *My Country* (2010) by *Ann-Sofie Sidén* (b. 1962). The work consists of video from a multi-week trip that she and some of her students at The Royal Institute of Art (Kungl. Konsthögskolan) made from Stockholm to the sculpture park at Wanås in Scania. They travelled at a slow pace, mostly riding horses or walking, and they captured the rural parts of Sweden that are only rarely visible in the media. The video recordings were later edited into to a large video installation that gives the viewer an uncommented portrait of a non-urban, slower Sweden that lives closer to nature than most of us do today. It is not a romantic image, but one full of everyday life.

Political art in Sweden in recent years has often come to mean art dealing in identity politics. This is a complex field, but one that often takes place within the realm of culture and representation, thus its dominance of the art scene should come as no surprise.

## Conclusion

Few things have been constant in Sweden during the post-war period except change itself. Our society, its ideals, and its politics are constantly changing, and culture evolves together with the rest of society. In the sixties we saw a much greater influx of international art into Sweden, the seventies became a time of political protest, the eighties were a time of theoretical and economic excess, the nineties introduced identity politics into art and society, and the time since the beginning of the new millennium has seen a renewed interest in political art but with new objectives.

Politics and art do mix, and many times the mix provides an energetic and very interesting result, as I hope to have shown here. This does not mean, however, that politics is the main subject of art. The history of the post-war period in Swedish art can be told from many different perspectives, and this is just one of them.

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