

Shifting the Real

Three Case Studies from the Nordic Art Scene

According to Alain Badiou, the 20th century was marked by a “passion for the Real,”¹ not by utopian promises of a better world to come, but by a profound interest in the immediately practicability of things, the here and now. I would claim that this is no longer entirely true, since the utopian has become a tool for political action. Yet, the Real is this dimension that constantly escapes our conceptual framework. How does the utopian will to change the world relate to the slippery realm of the Real? According to its most avid explorer, Jacques Lacan, the Real can only be understood in relation to the symbolic and the imaginary. The Real escapes the symbolic and can neither be spoken nor written, thus approaches the impossible, and therefore is not dissimilar to how utopias are envisioned—as places where the impossible becomes possible.

The Real never ceases to reinvent itself. Engendered by trauma, the Real “always returns to the same place.”² Slavoj Žižek came to the conclusion that the Real is our global capitalism, covered up by the good intentions of American war politics, and Jean Baudrillard went as far as identify the Real with terrorism, claiming that simulations of reality (such as television, film, etc.) have become more real than real life and that we are lost in an infinite chain of signs and representations.³ It’s difficult to say whether these theories have influenced art or *vice versa*, but one thing is sure: the 1990s were rife with depictions of traumatic realism, dystopias and everything else that we are unable to integrate in our reality, and

therefore also experience as a nightmarish apparition.

Thomas Hirschhorn, the Picasso of our times (and by Picasso, I’m thinking of *Guernica*, and not of the *petit-bourgeois* deconstructions of women and interior designs), has for a long time now assembled the horrors of our world in all-encompassing cabinets of curiosities. In his latest installation *Crystal of Resistance* in Venice (2011), mutilated war victims and pornographic encounters are viewed through the frame of our most technologically advanced device—the iPhone. But this time the images were taken care of, through the sensual touch of caressing yet wound-opening fingers. Thomas Hirschhorn is like Thomas the Doubter inserting his finger in the wounds of our repeatedly resurrecting society, turning it around and around, asking himself: is this for real or a figment of my imagination?

Yes, terror is out there, but as long as we look at it like a paralyzed deer in front of headlights, nothing can be done. We have become mentally trained to deal with disaster. Still we are doing nothing about it. We are looking and touching the Real, but these ecumenical gestures are not enough.

FROM TRAUMATIC REALISM TO OPTIMISTIC UTOPIANISM

If we zoom onto the Nordic art scene, there seems to be another approach to the Real among the youngest generations.

They propose a shift from contemplation to action, from mimetic representation to the production of new realities, although our relation to the Real is always mediated. One can also see another shift, which is far more important. I would say that these younger artists have ceased to see the encounter with the Real as a traumatic experience. They are more interested in grasping the Real by its balls and rearranging the fields of representation and reality production, favouring an optimistic engagement with the possibilities of art—if not to change the world, then at least to improve it a little bit.

Kultivator, a group of Swedish artists (founded in 2005) operating in the twilight zone of art and activism, settled on the island Öland, trying to live and work as ecologically as possible, producing their own “cross cultural nomadic cheese” and taking care of an abandoned farm by enriching it with playful innovations like mobile chicken houses. This is by no means a romantic return to nature *à la Candide*, but a serious engagement with the geopolitical aspects of how Sweden is producing and distributing aliments today. On their website are historical backgrounds of how some products have emerged, but also information on how to produce them here and now, through short scientific descriptions and recipes. The goal is to become as autonomous as possible, but also to create a space of interdependencies within the art world as well as the local communities—an equation that has become more and more difficult to resolve, with the rise of “contemporary art haters” in recent years in Sweden.



In 2010, Kultivator arranged *The Wedding Between Art & Agriculture*, a three-day wedding and cross-fertilization between two seemingly opposed worlds. The first two days involved a group of twenty people engaged in preparations and seminars. The third day, the public was invited to celebrate with the participants in a festivity that celebrated the simplicity of a life in the countryside and the more pagan traditions that have long been forgotten, like dressing in straw clothes and hats, and ritualistic engagement in dancing and drumbeating. The cows played an important role, but also the soil, the ultimate face of the Real that we all encounter sooner or later. The soil was excavated out of the ground and worshiped as if it was the God of all things.

What is the outcome of all this? Is the marriage between art and agriculture a sustainable encounter or a passionate spectacle of special effects? Is it an effective change of the Real or a temporary utopia that risks crumbling as soon as everyone has packed their bags and left? It’s hard to say, but for now Kultivator is the perfect dreamfactory. Dreams are made of matter, and that matter has to be cultivated. Baudrillard imagined a utopian realm where we would all engage in a “symbolic exchange,” where the gifts we give to each other cease to be consumer objects, becoming instead symbols of friendship, love, or community. Kultivator is definitely succeeding in producing such a symbolic exchange and everyone is welcome to participate. One can start by bringing inspiration from their manual of 10 “post-revolutionary”

¹ Alain Badiou, *Le Siècle, Le Seuil, Paris 2005*.

² Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire 11, 1973*.

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death, SAGE Publications, London 1993*.

exercises: 1) Disregard borders, 2) Locate the wild edible plants in your neighbourhood, 3) Help a farmer, 4) Buy nothing, 5) Learn from old people, 6) Milk a cow, 7) Forget money, 8) Reclaim technology, 9) Organize a party to get to know your neighbours, 10) Spread the word.

If the Real is the object of anxiety, and psychoanalysis teaches the patient “to bring desire into existence,” Kultivator’s actions are both calming and desire stimulating.

FROM NOSTALGIC RETRO-FUTURISM TO PROGRESSIVE FUTURISM

The fictional aspects of quantum physics, and the hypothetical possibility of time travelling have always interested the Swedish artist Lina Persson (b. 1978). If Tacita Dean is constantly rewriting the past, she is trying to rewrite the future. As Winston Churchill claimed: “If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future.” If the Future is the Real, the object of anxiety *par excellence*, then it has to be colonized. Apart from playful enactments of new scientific discoveries and “docu-fictional” navigations through parallel worlds, Lina Persson also conducts interviews and discussions with “real scientists,” who study topics such as how to twist time into a loop by twisting space, and how to create new modes of existence by controlling light. In one of her recent films, at one point



Lina Persson asks the scientist: “If it’s possible to travel in the future, why don’t we see time travellers from the future in our time?” The scientist claims that one can only return back as far as the point from which one originated. In other words, the future can never return to us, but we can travel into the future. The questions that seem to haunt Persson the most are: Where are we going and how is this going to end? Can we send particles back in time? A change of the past could also change the course of things and thereby annihilate our own existence. The biggest change that Lina Persson is trying to achieve is how we conceive science.

Art and scientific research have much in common, although art seeks the particular and science the general. The problem, according to Lina Persson, is that science is often coded as white and male, that it pretends to represent reality, despite the fact that scientific models are repeatedly proven inaccurate and are constantly rewritten. Artists have always been very sensitive to the cracks that lead to scientific paradigm shifts, and Persson through her playful, progressive futurism is identifying those scientific cracks, nevertheless in relation to socio-economical models.

In *Colonizing Futures* (2010), Lina Persson explores the relationship between satellites, our present socio-political climate, and how it is constructing the future. The satellite was the metaphor for Swedish “Million-Program Suburbs,” an economical utopian model inspired by the French late modernism,

that eventually lead to segregation and alienation. In photographs taken with a Hasselblad camera, the same camera that was used to take the first pictures on the moon, one can see an unidentifiable visitor exploring the wastelands between the city of Gothenburg and the suburb Bergsjön, in a mystical remapping of the future.



institute, where they are soon to be interrupted by rain. Is the rain a coincidence or is Strindberg’s restless spirit persecuting the filmset? The film ends with a séance in which a medium induces Strindberg’s spirit of Fia-Stina Sandlund, along with some of Sweden’s most powerful female playwrights, actors, artists, and writers. During

the séance two important things occur: Strindberg admits he regrets that he let Miss Julie die at the end of the play. Secondly: the women attending the séance go against him, arguing that he should not repent, that the play had to be written, because it highlights a key dilemma: the balance of power between the sexes. The primary question that arises from this story-rewriting experience is: Can we forgive Strindberg and all the authors who have killed freedom hungry women? I’m thinking of the murders of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Zola’s Nana, Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, and Schnitzler’s Miss Else? Not to mention Sophocle’s Antigone.

What can we do with all these symbolic “femicides?” With these narrative ruins that still write our time? Fiction can only be tackled with other fictions. Only in this way can we attack the Real, through a passionate rewriting of its representations and influences on our lives. †

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- www.linapersson.se
- www.kultivator.org
- www.fiastinasandlund.se