

The gaze of modernity

Cecilia Widenheim

In view of aesthetic considerations
(and for the sake of functionality)
the architects have made the clouds square.

Thus, above the desolate forest sprawls the suburb.
High above the ridges the cloud cubes line up
reflecting deeply in the unsuspecting forest lake
mighty rows of window voids
underlined by the sunset's beautiful red neon.
There in reverentially spared cumulus piles play hygienic children
(never touched by human hand)
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From *Non serviam* (1945) by Gunnar Ekelöf

Photography appears to be forever united with the 20th century interpretation of belief in the future and with the way in which we remember in pictures. Through photography the gaze of modernity is simultaneously both liberated from the perspective of past generations, and controlled by the achievements of modern technology. In several of her works Susanne Kriemann explores the gaze of modernity, guiding the viewer through carefully selected episodes in the history of photography and perception, and focusing on the encounter between our image of the past, the present and the ideologies associated with our common history. As viewers we are dismayed, seduced and fascinated. Is this how the ideologies of modernity arise?

In the work **12 650 000** from 2008, Susanne Kriemann positions a gigantic concrete cylinder – *Schwerbelastungskörper* – in the lead role. The concrete cylinder was erected in 1941 to test durability and load tolerance in preparation for the global capital city Germania that Adolf Hitler dreamt of, with buildings made of marble and granite. At General-Pape-Strasse near Tempelhof in Berlin, the 12,650-ton colossus, built by French POWs under the command of Albert Speer, can still be seen. Today, the imposing volume has been renovated and is a listed monument. With sensitivity, Susanne Kriemann

has combined historic press clippings from the archives with contemporary pictures of the monument that was recently awakened from its long slumber. In a series of images that include photos from the war years and recent pictures, Kriemann inserts herself into the genre of industrial history with a nod to the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, legendary for their work in this field. In Kriemann's collages of black and white photos the concrete mass is transformed into a megalomaniac urban vessel for memories.

The project **One time 1 000 000** is based on the biography of the world-famous Swedish photographic genius Victor Hasselblad. In Susanne Kriemann's hands, his success story gets an unexpected turn though. Hasselblad was born into photography in 1906, thanks to the family business Hasselblads Fotografiska AB. He started as an apprentice in his father's firm and, after finishing his schooling, was sent to Germany as a trainee. Here he published his first article, before the age of 20, in the magazine Photo-Technik. The article discusses the best way to photograph birds, and what was required to develop this technique "in order to outwit our plumed friends". Even as a child, Victor Hasselblad had shown a fascination for nature during his summer holidays and started keeping a diary of his observations. Some years later, he travelled from north to south in Sweden photographing birds, and in 1935 his book *Flyttfågelstråk* (Migratory Bird Trails) was published.

Bird-watching may, at first glance, appear to be an innocuous hobby for the nature-loving photographer. But the bird's-eye view, modern social theory and the cult of technology seem to be inseparably entwined. Charles Darwin began laying out his theories in the 1830s, after a trip to the Galapagos Isles in the Pacific as a 22-year-old. Thanks to "Darwin's finches", modern evolutionary biology was born. Just before the Second World War, the British ornithologist David Lack decided to revisit the Galapagos Isles. However, he was drafted into the army and was employed in radar reconnaissance against German bombers. By a twist of fate, this led to Lack becoming one of the world's most renowned researchers into bird migration. In 1947, he published his book *Darwin's Finches*. When the war broke out Victor Hasselblad's small photo shop at Kungssportsplatsen in Gothenburg soon began to feel the effects of the wartime ban on civil photography in the west region. Hasselblad was commissioned by the Swedish air force to construct a reconnaissance camera for military use. Denmark and Norway were soon under German occupation, and Hasselblad started his work based on a camera that was said to be retrieved from a German fighter aircraft shot down over Swedish territory.

This is where Susanne Kriemann's voyage starts. On a research visit in Stockholm she bought a Hasselblad aerial camera from 1942 at an auction along with a few rolls of old film. Some time later, she organised an aerial photography session with the old 1940s equipment. Susanne Kriemann chose to fly over a few of the vast suburban 1960s-70s housing estates on the outskirts of Stockholm in Sweden. The artist thus completed the circle by taking the old aerial camera back up into the air, choosing the aerial, or bird's-eye, perspective – the unrivalled favourite angle of modernism – which embodies a distanced as well as a supervising and visionary view.

During the period 1964-1974, one million new apartments were built in Sweden. This venture is often referred to in Swedish debate as the "million programme". The political objective was to come to terms with the housing shortage. The project exuded an optimistic attitude to development. New technology and industrialised building methods promised rational changes in the housing environment. To satisfy the buoyant export industry the Swedish borders were opened to labour from abroad.

Rosengård, Fittja, Skärholmen, Rinkeby, Tensta, and Hammarkullen. A critic dubbed Skärholmen a "concentration camp of the welfare state", another claimed that "the slum of our grandchildren" had seen the light of day. The so-called concrete suburbs were lambasted for their inhumane proportions and rapidly became symbols of segregation, and for conforming to the demands of production. The influence of the users themselves was practically non-existent in many cases. The people who were to live in the million programme had not yet moved from the countryside to the cities, or even approached Swedish borders. The yardstick was often mono-cultural, a Swedish family with a gainfully-employed man, a housewife and two kids.

Nearly forty years have passed since then. Today, we refer to these areas as intercultural globalisation centres, and there is currently a discussion about the best ways to preserve these estates as monuments of cultural and architectural history. Interestingly, by linking bird photography, the history of the development of camera technology and the architecture of the million programme, Susanne Kriemann also approaches what could be called a Swedish or Nordic interpretation of international modernism, where an encounter between nature lyricism and rationalist modern technology often takes centre stage. The aerial shots reveal the sharp contrasts between underground stations, shopping precincts and pristine pine groves on the boundary between the urban and rural landscape. Moreover, in retrospect the

million programme also appears to be a form of social load tolerance study created by and for humans, not entirely unlike the tests carried out to test the tolerance and durability of concrete in Berlin. How fast, cheap and rational solutions can the modern, homeless human being endure? What emerges is an image of Sweden's mixed economy as a unique alliance between capitalism and socialism, between personal choice and welfare policy. Here, the dreams of increased buying power and higher living standards went hand-in-hand, and social engineering celebrated new triumphs.

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Sources:

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Susanne Kriemann, *12 650*, Berlin 2008

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