

## In These Places we Store Knowledge

Ulrika Flink

I received an email one day from Susanne Kriemann asking if I wanted to help her arrange a helicopter flight in Stockholm. We met when Susanne was a resident at IASPIS (International Artists' Studio Program in Sweden) in autumn 2006. The flight was to be a continuation of the project *Birds in Flight*, a work that started when she bought the Hasselblad flight camera at an auction in Stockholm. We had only a few days to make it happen and I got started calling helicopter companies and Susanne tried to find a back-up photographer who could join her during the flight. After talking to several pilots we got to know that there are a lot of rules and regulations regarding how low the helicopter can fly over residential areas. I explained that Susanne was looking to fly over the suburbs of Tensta and Rinkeby created by the "miljonprogrammet", a political solution to the housing shortage of the 1960's. Why would she like to take pictures of those ugly concrete buildings, one pilot asked, bewildered by the notion of making art of something as sterile as the architecture of the "miljonprogrammet". I tried to explain to him about the abstract forms of the buildings created by the formations of several buildings joined together seen from the air, but he still thought the idea was strange, and declined to help us since he was specialized in flying hunters of elk around. Helicopter Assistance based at the airport Stockholm-Bromma agreed to help us but only if we had a pre-decided flight route. I spent a long time on Google Earth trying to find houses in the area that looked like Susanne envisioned.

The day before the flight the weather was cloudy and I got worried because we didn't have time to reschedule for another day. But the next day the photographer Jean-Baptiste, Susanne and I met up in the subway excited about the coming flight and the clear weather. What seemed to be a simple route to the airfield was more complicated than we had thought and we were running late. The owner of the helicopter company picked us up in his car and we proceeded in high speed to pass several security points, before he dropped us off on the airfield next to a small bright red helicopter. By this point we were all a bit nervous and the flight crew's "let's do it attitude" added to the tension. We got interrupted in the middle of the thorough but quick security briefing, a several times larger helicopter – "The Old Russian" – than the one we had rented was

on its way in to the landing strip next to us. The wind pulled in our clothes and ear plugs were quickly handed out. When "The Old Russian" came in closer we understood why: the sound of the spinning rotor blades filled the air.

Jean-Baptiste and Susanne tried out the seating arrangement and it was decided that Susanne would fly in the back without doors, which would grant her free range. It was of utmost importance that all things were firmly secured; to drop something during the flight over a residential area could mean death. During the security briefing and the seating arrangement I documented the flight for Susanne's personal archives. I backed away from the helicopter when the pilot started the rotor blades. It was my job to document the take off and the landing. But silly me, the idea of waiting for them on the landing field was of course absurd, or as the helicopter man who drove us to the airstrip pointed out – it could be a security risk. I couldn't see myself as a security risk, but I realized that there was no time to argue and I jumped into the car and we drove for five minutes in high speed to the office of the helicopter company. I was placed in a sofa in a tiny room where the walls were covered in ties and garter belts with cute greetings written on them. I had to ask what it was all about, and I found out that it is a tradition that the students who receive their helicopter license give a gift to their instructors. When you wait for something as anxiously as I did, time moves very slowly and when the man suddenly reappeared in the doorway screaming "we have to go, they are on their way!" several hours seemed to have passed. We jumped into his car and I held on for dear life and tried at the same time to untangle the camera from the bag. I could see the helicopter from the car window as we approached the air field. When we finally got there, I jumped out while the car was still moving and I think I got three good shots of the landing. Susanne was exhilarated when she unstrapped herself from the security belt and removed her helmet. Poor Jean-Baptiste who had been sitting in the front seat next to the pilot, but had to sit turned back towards the backseat during the entire flight had gotten motion sickness and was extremely pale.

Unfortunately the old ROSS HK 7 camera did not work. But the other old camera worked. My other mission was to find a picture taken by a ROSS HK 7 during the 1940's. This proved to be a real ghost chase, because as I found out during my research Sweden does not have an institution organizing, registering and caring for photographs. Photographs are spread out all over the country

and sometimes kept in poor conditions. One archive expert told me: "In these places we store knowledge and memory but we don't value this knowledge because there is never enough money to properly care for the material". I have talked to experts from different museums, state archives and regional archives, and they all said the same thing; our registers do not tell us which camera took the photo – only the place, year and name of the photographer. This meant that I had to convince different archive staff to go out to far away storehouses and dig up old negatives to measure them. The magic format was 7 x 9 centimeters, a special format used by the ROSS HK 7.

To call people up and ask for an image taken by a camera produced in the autumn of 1941 in only 240 copies can trigger interesting responses. I remember the owner of a photo store in Kungsbacka, a small city outside of Gothenburg, who got very excited talking about his passion for old cameras. He told me that he knew a man, Sören Gunnarsson, who had done extensive research on Hasselblad cameras, and that Sören could probably help me. I called him up, but when he told me that he had been to all the different archives, and still had not found any images, I got a bit worried that this was a "mission impossible".

I sent out 25 emails and archive staff from all over Sweden came back to me with negative answers. I called Susanne, worried by the negative trend. But later the same day I talked to the expert Jan Dahlström at the Military Archives. He let me in on a small secret (although I had indeed already heard it from many other archives), namely that we have a lot of material that we have not been able to catalog. After a downsizing of the Swedish military, records started to flow into the Military Archive. Jan promised to look deep down in the archives, and when I received his email telling me that he thought he had found the 7 x 9 format that I was looking for, it felt like my birthday. Susanne and I met up one rainy morning to visit the archive together. The Military Archive is housed in a large and impressive building; I guess we both felt that we entered a very different world when the heavy door closed behind us. We met Jan and he gave us white cotton gloves before we took the elevator deep down into the basement. We walked past rows and rows of document holders following the yellow arrows painted on the concrete floor. He finally opened a door and standing on bookshelves where boxes filled with photographs. Jan took out his ruler and

pointed to three boxes. Susanne pulled out the box and the first thing we saw were two rolls of film taken by a ROSS HK 7.

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