

Journal of a Peeping Tom

Bruno Mathsson revisited

It takes a fair amount of passion to devote six years of one's life to discovering the ins and outs of an absent man's world, however inadvertently this may have occurred. Mikael Olsson simply visited this Swedish architect's summer refuge and began photographing the fascinating, long-abandoned premises, when he became utterly enraptured and felt an unrelenting urge to dig deeper. This exploratory adventure effectively materialised into a palimpsest, in the guise of a comprehensive view of a life captured through the eyes of an intervener-cum-voyeur with much sensitivity and awe.

text and images MIKAEL OLSSON





FK02.2003 (above)

FK08.2005 (right)

Facing page:
FK04.2003 (top)

FK01.2004 (bottom)

In 2000 I made my first visit to the summerhouse of Swedish architect and designer Bruno Mathsson, Frösakull, built in 1960 on the west coast of Sweden near Halmstad. It was a deeply moving experience. The building had been abandoned for many years, but most of the furniture, fittings and even many of Mathsson's personal belongings remained untouched after his death.

I realised that this was a perfect platform for a phenomenological investigation of space and utopian ideas, and began taking photographs of the building. What I didn't know was that the project would grow into something of an obsession. For six years, I kept returning to the summerhouse, often staying overnight, sometimes for a week. At first I was hesitant to touch any of his belongings, but after a while I felt confident enough to start rearranging the furniture and even use Mathsson's own cutlery. For me Frösakull was a strange experience; I ate, slept, and stayed there during all the seasons of the year.

Future past

The building was constructed both as a summerhouse for Mathsson and his wife Karin, and as an on-site experiment in utilitarian architecture. It is an extremely simple, no-nonsense building with a portable, out-



door kitchen unit, sliding doors and no heating. All the furniture was designed by Mathsson himself, who was primarily known as a designer and only built a few houses in his lifetime. The Frösakull house, which opens up to the surrounding landscape, was built with a focus on Mathsson's interest in sports, nature and nudism – he even preferred to sleep outdoors. Simultaneously, the building is deeply rooted in the modernist, social democratic Swedish values of the time, focusing on democracy, health and rationalism. But while modernism is primarily concerned with the future, photography itself is, by nature, rooted in an ever-receding past.

Returning at different times of year, I experienced how the light and climate change the perception of the building and its rooms. The house seems to have a life of its own, the walls change colour with the seasons, and in the winter ice covers the floors. In the photographs you can also experience how the building has aged and, to a certain extent, decayed over time. A house is a living, breathing thing that will eventually cease to exist. Since photography itself is a manifestation of and a meditation on time, there is a deep connection between photography and architecture.





Delving in

My photographs of Frösakull are a way of researching the temporality of the building and its spatial qualities. My ambition was not to make a documentary; rather, I wanted to make a portrait of the building, explore its architectural personality. I treated the rooms as constantly changing milieus, experimenting and rearranging the interior so as to create different conditions, to really understand the house while questioning what may be neglected or erased through subsequent repair and reoccupation. Avoiding the documentary impulse and employing methods established by conceptual art, my physical engagement with the interior is also related to staged photography. Two images of the same room may differ radically, challenging photography's claim to authenticity. The fictionalised image may, I believe, convey a deeper truth than straightforward documentation.

One year after I first visited Frösakull, I came upon Karin and Bruno Mathsson's permanent home, Södrakull, in Värnamo in central Sweden (constructed in 1964). Boarded up and abandoned, the Södrakull building was also in a state of disrepair, partly overgrown. As I didn't have access to the interior, I chose instead to photograph the building through the drawn curtains, making the images voyeuristic in a way that is actually inherent in all photography. Reflections of



the surrounding trees in the windows blend with the glimpsed interiors, blurring the boundaries between outside and inside, between public and private space, between architecture and nature.

Together, the images in my book, Södrakull Frösakull (Steidl, 2011), transgress the boundaries between spatiality, photography and memory. They reflect my interest in architecture, where the buildings function as starting points for artistic research about our relationship to the surrounding space, whether architectural or metaphorical. #

FK05.2004 (above)
FK15.2004 (left)
Facing page:
SK03.2002 (top right)
SK12.2002 (top left)
SK02.2001 (bottom)



FK09.2004 (top)

FK01.2000 (top right)

FK04.2004 (above)

FK09.2002 (above right)

Book Cover (right)



Images: courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm/Berlin

Book: Södrakull Frösakull by Mikael Olsson,
Text by Beatriz Colomina, Hans Irrek and Helena Mattsson
Book design by Jonas Jansson, Daniel Carlsten & Mikael Olsson
Published by Steidl & Partners, 2011 (special limited edition also available)

Exhibition: Södrakull Frösakull at House of Sweden, Washington DC until
06 May 2012, and at Artipelag, Stockholm, opening 01 June 2012.

www.houseofsweden.com
www.artipelag.se
www.steidtville.com