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ULRIK SAMUELSON. KUNGSTRÄDGÅRDEN'S SUBWAY STATION
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What is a museum? What is artistic decoration? What is a stage for the events of life?

Between 1974 and 1977, Ulrik Samuelson directed and executed the artistic interpretation of stage one of Kungsträdgården's subway station in central Stockholm, a part of the city's traffic machine. The platform hall for Kungsträdgården, nearly 40 meters below ground-level, and the passageway down from Regeringsgatan were completed. Not until nine years later, in 1986, was stage two finished; the entrance from Arsenalsgatan. The rich and versatile work of Ulrik Samuelson - a total work of art - where he mixes clearly conceived conceptual art with refreshingly commonplace effects, can be seen as an artistic whole, one of the most magnificent in contemporary art.

Along the track, the raw, unworked rock emerges - a symbol for eternity, solidity, stillness and firmness - slowly and uncompromisingly colored by running water, chemical precipitations, soft algae and different species of moss. The ground water penetrates from invisible cracks in the rock and trickles in free paths along the primary rock down to a little ditch on the floor, or runs tranquilly down black, protruding baroque forms. The rock we meet in the cave is, according to ancient traditions, associated with the female god. The exposed stone massif reminds us of the history of our globe in a very long perspective of time, something that fascinates many artists of our times, not only within earth art and the *arte povera* tradition.

In the ceiling, for safety reasons, there are reinforcements and a sprayed layer of cement in the green, forgetting color of moss. The patterned floor is made out of cement mosaic. Here and there, there are inlaid pictures of animals from time immemorial. Through the annual rings of the rock we have stepped down into prehistoric times that overwhelms us. Other pictures on the floor we slip on show enlarged snap-tops from beer cans. The party is over. The consumer society soon becomes history.

Ulrik Samuelson deconstructs life above ground. When he puts together the pieces again in the underworld, gestures and objects mingled with life stand out, upside down, but perhaps truer.

In stage one, the artist portrays the history of Kungsträdgården and its surroundings. We may see originals and castings of pieces of architecture and sculptures from buildings in the vicinity. The laughing and luckless mascarons that look out from the rock are reminders of de la Gardie's 17th century palace, Makalös, "Exceptional". A male and a female torso are castings of sculpural details from the same palace, that was built as a private home by the House of de la Gardie. Later, the building served as a theater up until the fire of 1825. In the display cases of the station, you can see what the palace looked like. The flapping, painted baldachin in the downward entrance from Regeringsgatan calls to mind the opera and theater activity around Kungsträdgården. In an underpass, there is space for bill-posting for cultural events. On the longer walls that run along the tracks, there are figurative representations carved out of sheet iron. Among other things one finds Ulrik Samuelson's own signature, an enlargement of his thumb print.

Stage two was considerably delayed, mainly because of the so-called Struggle of the Elms in 1971. At that time, the residents of Stockholm successfully availed themselves of extra-parliamentary methods to prevent some elm trees from being cut down to make way for the subway entrance. The way-up was moved and as a result of this, the completion of stage two was considerably delayed. Artists are prohibited from making political statements in their work in the subway. However, Ulrik Samuelson defied that decree. A tree trunk, made out of concrete, with gashes from the teeth of a saw is suggestive of this successful popular struggle.

Beside this, an oil barrel splashes in the yellow and blue of the Swedish flag; an ironic commentary on the welfare of the Western World that is built on dependency on oil and strongly fluctuating energy prices.

The station was dimensioned to become a junction in the Stockholm subway, with frequent pulse-beats of passengers. But it has rather become a blind gut. I meet a man playing the violin under the painted vault, which reminds me of pictorial representations in the medieval churches in Uppland, Sweden. Some whistling young people pass by, on their way to the theater. A straggler comes flying on a skateboard. A mouse slants himself into my shoelace.

Ulrik Samuelson formulates in an excellent way his experiences and thoughts around the latest part of the work in the subway: "rock under, above and on the sides; floor, ceiling and walls run into and out of each other. The room encloses me entirely. At the same time: a clear emphasis on what has been added and on what has been taken away, moulded vault against the marks/scars left by the drills in the rock. It is not having anything up

one's sleeve that gives a feeling of freedom like in the presence of the experience of carrying and carried in some old colonnade." (from an unpublished journal article)

In your journey to Hades you are not sent by boat across the river Styx, but descend a long comfortable escalator to the underworld. In the ceiling above the escalator up to Arsenalsgatan there is a painted, stylized, large-sized piano keyboard, that associates to the Musical Academy close by.

After that, you meet a vault, painted with silicate paints that let the dampness through, that consists of a large number of irregular panels, that are painted with remarkable things by Ulrik Samuelson and Arne Fredriksson. They are framed by borders consisting of marbling in white and wood imitations. Where you would expect rosette ornaments, warning signals for radioactivity sit like cogwheels in the machinery. The artists have described a profound change in people's mentality during the latter part of the 20th century. Heavier and lighter clouds attack, float in above the vault, make it exciting. Under the clouds the leakage from the rock is concealed, that does not spread.

He who states that the retrospective is dishonest, must make an exception for Ulrik Samuelson's subway station at Kungsträdgården. For he who is acquainted with the artist's earlier work, a number of subjects appear again, but now in a new context.

I am thinking of, for example, exhibitions such as Nekromanti, 1966; Caput Mortuum 1969; Der Raum (together with Sivert Lindblom), 1970, Düsseldorf, Nürnberg and Stuttgart; en vogue, 1970-71, in Alternative Suédoise, Paris, Louisiana, Stockholm; Totem, 1973; Live Show 2 (together with Björn Lövin and Sivert Lindblom), 1977, Luzern; Requiem, 1978; To the Bone, 1982, Venice; Aurora Borealis (with other Swedish artists), 1984, Madrid; Exit, 1987, New York. Stockholm, if nothing else is stated.

We meet the black flat-bottomed rowing-boat again; here, with the petal of a water-lily in the same color, all of them romantic symbols for death and corruption. Another indication of the side of death is the painted cracked skull in a corner.

Ulrik Samuelson has engraved his memories and his tangible items in the vault. There, the dreary, gray pork sausage and the cracked chair have found their dwelling place. The crackled chair, yet another Ulrik Samuelson repeat, is both used and fresh at the same time. Was this what the idea of the chair looked like? The artist brands that which deviates on our retinas. By taking the life of the chair, he makes us see it.

If objects are repeated enough times, one's thoughts cannot avoid looking for a meaning. Repetition hints at a pattern, that something is especially important for the artist. The man without skin, where the muscles are laid bare, is gotten from an anatomy poster. He appears, large-sized, in a central place in the vault holding a burning torch. The man is also found in contour in several places in the works in iron along the tracks. Is he the sincere, humble man that is the measure of all things in a bureaucratized and thoroughly technicalized world?

According to Stockholm's Local Traffic, which has commissioned the work, erotic pictures are not allowed. A man and a woman make love - in defiance. Perhaps it is these two little people, calling to mind old paintings from Pompeii, that constitute the hub around which the pictorial world of the entire vault takes place. The primordial power of love and life have a chance, despite everything.

We see an egg cup, the knot of a rope, a romantic sunset, a table with a checkered table-cloth, a bouquet of flowers à la peasant art... There is a special Nordic light in a landscape with northern lights above pine trees in snow that is connected with Ulrik Samuelson's interest in ecology. The same thing applies to the swimming seal. The ball with the all-seeing eye looks down at you, into your soul. You are acquainted with the pieces of a puzzle in disarray. But what does the whole mean?

The objects are deprived of something. Even more important is their presence. Ulrik Samuelson shows our solidarity with them, even if they are odd. The objects, that retain meanings from long ago, are anything but still lifes, where decanters, pieces of fruit, pieces of meat, etc. support each other family-wise, such things where charm and character of merchandise dominate. No, they are given preferential treatment, isolated from each other by the power of the moulding, so that they - in tranquillity and with their eyes open - can receive time. "Thus, the manifest presence of things forms my own presence among them." (Ulrik Samuelson, Form 1984:1)

But at the same time, the objects, landscapes and figures are fragments in a choir of five, six, seven, and eight sided forms with straight lines and obtuse angles. The polygons, a kind of alphabet, with varying numbers of corners and with sides of varying length, which we have often met in the work of the artist over the years, create a discontinuity in the system. But discontinuity is a prerequisite for communication.

Ulrik Samuelson's exhibition in Stockholm the autumn of 1988, at Galerie Aronowitsch, was called "in memory". This could also be the title of his work in Kungsträdgården's subway station.

The artist questions time; the time that has been, the present and the future. The painter has his time, the critic his and each observer has his. Time resembles the unequal-sided frames, that move off in different directions and at the same time have such a charged content.

The moulding of the cell formations indicates a desire to classify, to put into compartments, that calls to mind the good old Swedish tradition of Carl von Linné and his sexual system for plants; or is everything grim irony and joking with the same system?

When you continue your wandering in the underworld, you pass a border. I observe, quite briefly, that the powerful black and white striped ceiling of the vault conveys one's thoughts to the Great Mosque at Cordoba, and that Ulrik Samuelson mentions a Roman monastery near Sofia in Bulgaria.

The next stage in the wandering through hell is a catwalk, that leads to the hall with the tracks. On either side of the bridge, you see groups of sculptures and architectural fragments, spread out on the ground or placed on small pedestals and podiums. On the ground mosses, ferns and other vegetation that survive well in the extreme underground climate sprout up. The artist has worked together with specialists in order to produce a suitable vegetation. According to Taoism, miniature gardens are copies of paradise on earth. Why not experience one of these in the underworld?

Stockholm's Local Traffic refuses to regularly be responsible for washing down among the sculptures and for sweeping away the rubbish, injection needles and other things. It is, of course, not this type of decay that the artist has wished to portray.

What you see is filled with so much more imagination than James Stirling's ruin pastiche in the spirit of postmodernism found on the entrance wall to Neue Staatsgalerie, in Stuttgart. Ulrik Samuelson talks about "sculpture graves". In a letter, the artist mentions some sources of inspiration: "the suggestive graphic works of Piranesi from the ruins of Rome" as well as "old pictures from the copper mine at Falun [in Sweden]". Have you come to an archeological site that has been forgotten about long ago?

But just like in a dream, the parts of the puzzle do not quite fit, at least not on a superficial level. Neon light tubes in blue wind around in two old gas lanterns from the building of the electric works in Stockholm. The neon, together with the haystack, already existed in the exhibit, Live Show, in 1974. The lanterns are placed like watchdogs in this typical passageway of the 1980's. Postmodernism, somebody shouts. But, actually, the neon

coils are a practical way to light up the lamps. It is hardly possible to bring in gas here.

In addition to this, there is an egg made out of unhewn stone, a symbol of birth, painted in a checkered pattern, that stands for the old, sophisticated game about life and death. The odd and unusual object has become appointed a work of art, and like an ascetic stylite preaching penance has landed high up on a small column.

When you, like Hercules in the poem by the 17th century Swedish poet Georg Stiernhielm stand at the crossroads, you are stigmatized by a large "X" in the background in living gold, an expression of the light of purity and spiritual wealth. Here it is, wayfarer. Dare aim at the unknown.

Will your friends believe you if you succeed in returning and carefully tell what you have seen?

The artist sees this latest, pictorially compressed part of the station as a crescendo in his work in the underworld. The musical term is not chosen by chance. Compare the keyboard above. The whole work is permeated with rhythm, harmony, disharmony and the flow of time when you, as passer-by, move through the passageways.

Ulrik Samuelson summarizes the dynamics and richness of his work in a very sensitive way. He is interested in contraries: "From, apparently trivial, opposites such as light and darkness (light and dark), sculpture - painting, coloristic actions - the gray, white and black of the rock, smooth and rough to more complex things such as nature and culture. Perhaps even life and death, matter and spirit, history and the present...It is as if (in the dim light of reflection) every 'statement' in two or three dimensions has called forth its opposite and contrary; its antithesis, if one so likes."

The more I write and analyze the objects and the suite of paintings, the more I kill them with my glance, the more I invite other glances to kill them. But, in reality, the paintings and the sculptures live a life of their own, a different, more profound life down here in the subconscious.

The round ball that the artist has placed a bit up on the face of the rock in one of the sculpture graves startles thought and feeling. Perhaps this is what it is really all about. But interpret the ball; no, that I cannot do.

Art is not capable of being appealed. It is a strength of the picture that it does not let itself be analyzed at once, that it cannot immediately be shaken apart to written atoms and thrown to the wind.

I have tried to formulate some thoughts about Ulrik Samuelson's sceneries around life and death. But,

basically, I sympathize with the lines of Roland Barthes in Essais critiques that especially apply to pictorial art: "to write, that is in a way to become 'quiet as a dead person', to become that person who is denied giving the last reply:".

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