

**Martin Karlsson**

In conversation with Markus Degerman  
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**Index**

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**Martin Karlsson** in conversation with Markus Degerman:  
artist, member of the designgroup Uglycute  
and member of Index exhibitiongroup

Discussions concerning art's relation to fantasy and reality have assumed renewed currency in recent years. An argument claiming that art should avoid any pretensions to addressing real issues has been heard from various channels. Presumably, art ought to be regarded as disassociated from a society-based and discursive attitude. One interpretation of this tendency towards avoidance is based on commercial and structural changes in the art world. In brief, these can be summarised as the convergence of institutional and private corporate strategies. As a consequence, it seems to be popular opinion that art should be living in its own world as much as possible, so it doesn't step on any toes. From this perspective, it's understandable to claim that art does not deal with society. Unfortunately, the effect is that art risks becoming completely tame. Fortunately in reality, art is neither more or less concerned with reality. Instead it is concerned about the various attitudes to this relationship.

Martin Karlsson is an artist whose work in many ways touches these issues concerning how and to what objective fiction can be employed. His work is frequently inspired by architecture, role-playing and historicism. Because he is interested in the social and political meaning of these issues, I consider his work to display a multifaceted reality with neither simple nor neutral attitudes. So I commenced our conversation by asking Martin to discuss his work using these issues as a starting point.

*Markus Degerman:* In your work for the Stockholm Stadsmuseum you have used documentary material which chiefly consists of two components. First, photographs from the Stockholm exposition in 1897 that show the 'Old Stockholm' attraction, which was a reconstruction of Stockholm in the age of the Vasa King; and second, documentation of a contemporary historical re-enactment association also focusing on the Vasa era. From my knowledge of your previous work, I'm aware that you are often interested in starting with a place and its specific history. So I am curious about how this context influenced your way of working?

*Martin Karlsson:* When Index invited me to create a work at the Stadsmuseum, the entire context of the city museum was, for me, a very important starting point. The museum's premises and assets in respect to knowledge and collections was limiting in an inspiration way. Once it became apparent that the exhibition space would be interspersed in the 'Stockholm – A Journey through Time' exhibit, then it seemed self-evident to work with 'time travel' in relation to Stockholm as a town. The background and context built a framework that allowed quite a lot of freedom. I could play about and act freely, without directly departing from the museum or its operations. I consider these kinds of limitations to create completely different and less burdensome freedoms than, for example, the white cube of the gallery space. Inside documentation is perhaps a proper description of the way I work. That I chose to work with Stockholm's Fänikan and Old Stockholm says more about my personal relationship to role playing and historical festivals. It was also

important that Stockholm's Fänikan worked with the same historical period and place as Old Stockholm, i.e. life in 16<sup>th</sup> century Stockholm.

*MD:* In an interview with the role-playing group 'Interacting Arts' that you made for 'Hjärnstorm' magazine's latest issue, the group mentions that one of their aims is to fight reality. As I understand it, this struggle implies a vital question I consider essential to ask in relation to your work as an artist: namely, the issue about who decides what reality has to look like. As an artist, do you have any influence whatsoever over what reality, and in this context that means society, has to look like or be interpreted?

*MK:* Interacting Arts meant that the very concept of reality limits that which is possible. I largely agree with them. The experience of reality depends, to a great extent, on a relation to medial images. Such media creates our perception of reality. It ought to follow that image-creating occupations such as the artist are effectively creating a new reality.

*MD:* That raises interesting questions about responsibility. Hopefully, if art possesses this effective role that you indicate, then how do you regard your own work concerning its ability to influence and transform?

*MK:* There is this conception about a division between fiction and reality. From my perspective, there is only reality, even when I am working with fiction. My images sometimes portray the fictive, yet I still consider them documentary. I think documentary images are interesting because they are part of a world of imagery that really ought to be described as a fiction. At the same time, they do portray a reality and in many cases also contribute to influencing and transforming this. The emergence of my professional identity is a clear example of this. Before I became an artist, I was playing at being an artist. I carried a sketch pad under my arm or slung a camera around my neck, hung out in cafés making sketches, drank wine, ate expensive food and lived far beyond my means. If I had had long hair, it would probably have been put up with a pencil. I consider this kind of role play or game to have potential and relevance when talking about reality-generated fictions. Physical virtual reality is largely what I am talking about.

*MD:* Do you utilise this potential in your work and if so how?

*MK:* Yes and no. When I'm making documentation with photographs, then I'm creating second-hand experiences that primarily aim to promote the subject to a discursive level. My way of working could well be reminiscent of what the French Situationists in the 60s called 'détournement'. A detour could be described as an alternative to a return. Like in ball games, by receiving a pass only to then knock it on in a different direction. Through plagiarism and distortion, it can provide new dimensions to existing phenomena and contexts. Perhaps what is referred to as living history and re-enactment could be considered a kind of 'détournement'. There is something of the impossible in attempting to live out history, a paradox and perhaps a utopian ideal. Nevertheless, examples such as Old Stockholm and Stockholm's Fänikan effectively create a physical experience that easily surpasses even the best written history book. I have used this in other installation-

based work. Several years ago for example, I preserved part of a communal garden that was scheduled for demolition in Linköping. It became a museum and a monument for the demolished area and at the same time remained a communal garden run by students from Linköping University. In the same year, I recreated a leisure area with sofas and armchairs that had been in Kulturhuset in the 70s. These works are beheld as art while also providing day-to-day practical functionality.

*MD:* When you mention the impossible or those paradoxes in attempting to live out history, I am reminded of your earlier work 'Undead Design'. You exhibited a collection of furniture that was worn out and broken to a point beyond recognition. What they all had in common was the fact that everything was by renowned designers and therefore had some kind of iconic status, which had not totally deserted them despite the poor condition of the items. In other words, they were just as the title suggests – undead. We could sense their history, function and status, which was now staged in preparation for another life. What is it that interests you in these stagings or living out such things?

*MK:* Historical staging is interesting because it not only portrays what we commonly regard as belonging to a past age, but also reflects the contemporary age of the staging itself. You get to live out one age while living in another. In those terms, living history is an impossibility. The attempt to realise the impossible interests me; in general you could say that this kind of trial and error and learning by doing characterises my work. The undead concept is quite fitting. Undead is a description of something that is physically dead but artificially brought to life. In fantasy literature and the horror film genre the undead are zombies, for example. They have been brought back to life as a result of black magic or occult rituals. In this case, you could say it is about undead history rather than living history. In this relationship of opposites between living and dead, historical and contemporary, fake and genuine, fictive and real, it is the undead, unreal, unhistorical and inauthentic that provides a kind of creative interface where time, space and identity are undefined and therefore negotiable.

*MD:* This gets back to what you mentioned before about having played the role of the artist before you became one. In other words, it was some kind of staging of a fantasy that then became real. For me, I feel your work investigates the possibilities offered by this room to manoeuvre between categories such as reality/fiction or copy/original, as well as promoting issues regarding the underlying causes and aims. What I wonder is how far you actually can disengage yourself from these various categories and roles that already exist and then what is actually possible?

*MK:* Abandoning categorisations would negatively influence art's ability to communicate. I don't know if I or anyone else would really want that. At the same time, the problem is that you often comply to these categories based on a world of imagery where you interpret and judge reality. For example, can an artist really look like anyone at all? Is conforming to expectations regarding artistic appearance partly a prerequisite to enable the communication of art as well as getting established and working in the art market? I think artists have relatively large possibilities in influencing the appearance of reality

while at the same time they, just as others if not more, are influenced by and communicate with images that others have created. Yet, I still find hope in this slightly disconsolate scenario. Perhaps you no longer need to create new images to create new art. I've always had difficulty in seeing myself as a creator of new images. Nor do I consider it particularly worth striving for.

*MD:* I get a feeling that in the art world it's advantageous to come across clearly. What's your relation to materials and aesthetics?

*MK:* I consider the idea of a distinguishing aesthetic mark to belong mostly to marketing and adjustments made to suit the market. It has very little to do with art itself. Form follows function is perhaps a bit out of date, but I think the concept is still applicable as art's 'to be or not to be'. I think it is important that artists and producers of exhibitions formulate their *raison d'être* in society if they really want to play any part in the future. Regarding my own art, I would say that I work with collage. Collage consists of fragments of images, taken out of context and assembled anew. Taken solely on outward appearances, it can constitute something new, but zoom in or pick apart the collage's parts and they still remain the same old recognisable images.

*MD:* Based on this perspective, what are your opinions concerning your exhibition at the Stockholm Stadsmuseum?

*MK:* Photographs are segments of a reality. Many photos together build a collage. Since I have neither taken the photos, nor filmed the footage, nor produced anything that is in the exhibition, it is all material that has no direct connection to me personally. I have no anecdotes or in-depth relation to what is shown in the images. It has been a source of imagery that I have immersed myself in, analysed and played around with. I have been a creative consumer. Put together, it can at best resemble a reality that is neither my own, nor that of Stockholm's Fänikan, Old Stockholm or the Stadsmuseum. In relation to the 'Old Stockholm' exposition, Ernest Florman's moving pictures from 1897 are interesting because they are considered to be films. Certainly, they show people in period costumes, but if you look carefully you'll see passers-by in 19<sup>th</sup> century dress unaware they are being filmed. The films are more documentary in nature than as historical staging. I like the fact that we never quite escape reality or the staging, our roles or ourselves. Art very much becomes my way of navigating these categorisations, where you can discover authenticity even in what we defined as artificial. We reveal ourselves through all the disguises.

*MD:* And so to my last question: was there any question you think I should have asked or that you would have liked me to ask?

*MK:* Perhaps the most obvious question is also the most difficult to answer: what role does role-playing games have in our society? What are its uses, origins and objectives in inter-personal relationships, in the building of society and as a communicative tool?

**Index** is a non commercial art space, owned and runed by Index The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation. The activities includes curatorial practise, exhibition production, project and pedagogical strategies.

During 2005/06 Index collaborates with Stockholm City Museum whilst a new exhibition space is renovated at Kungsbros strand 19.

More information on the activities can be found at:  
[www.indexfoundation.se](http://www.indexfoundation.se).