

Per Hasselberg and Henrik Andersson in conversation with Niklas Östholm

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Per Hasselberg OPTION

Henrik Andersson "if it's not love then it's the bomb that will bring us together"

In March 2004, Index's exhibition group made the decision to invite Per Hasselberg to exhibit at the gallery. This decision was taken with reference to the artist's previous work, notably the *Changing Places* exhibition at Index in May 2002. The initial recommendation came from curator Niklas Östholm, along with a concept allowing the artist to develop the exhibition over an extended period of time in continual dialogue between the curator and the artist himself. The exhibition would thus continue Index's work of supporting long-term, project-related art.

For many years, Per Hasselberg had been based in Malmö, southern Sweden. After graduating from the art school there, he had now relocated to Stockholm. We at Index were therefore curious to discover how he would relate to his new whereabouts, considering that his work is often inspired by a specific location and consequently a personal context. The artist's work extends outwards from a local context to society at large, encompassing major, historical ideologies and political movements. Frequently, the problems of the 'good' society are crystallised by using a speculative subvention. And it wasn't long after the project's initialisation that Per Hasselberg was inspired by a discovery close to his new home. This was the nuclear power station in Ågesta, that had supplied thermal heating to the Farsta neighbourhood during 1964-74. The exhibition group was duly presented with a project description and gave the artist its continued approval.

It was at this point that an additional artist was brought into the project - Henrik Andersson, who has had a significant role in this context. Through a series of conceptual audio-works, the artist has combined an interest in experimental music with a political engagement. More often than not, what we call cultural differences are assailed from a linguistic perspective, through translations and interpretations. Despite or perhaps because of their binding conceptual basis, the works often have a 'sound-film' that is alluring and emotionally engaging. With its distinct demarcations, in both concept and implementation, there is seldom any doubt about where the works begin and end.

The following conversation took place in Svedmyra, 5 Dec 2004, the neighbourhood where Per currently lives.

Niklas Östholm: We haven't been recording any of our conversations since the project began last spring. I thought this conversation might serve as a project summary for the exhibition. So, why don't we start by getting straight to the core of things – your respective interests and pathways into the subject of nuclear technology, and I'd like to start with you, Per. In the spring, you were invited to exhibit at Index, because we were interested in collaborating with you. Almost immediately afterwards, Henrik also came into the picture.

Per Hasselberg: Henrik was brought in because his work in Skåne¹ had worked so well. I had found several leads on which to build a multi-faceted work around – the heavy-water reactor, the Swedish Nuclear Policy and several persons associated with these – but setting the actual tone of the exhibition demanded a more distinctive work. Henrik had talked about his concept involving nuclear testing and it really works well in Index's 'white cube' exhibition space.

N: In the initial stages, what made the nuclear power station in Farsta so interesting or remarkable? In Sweden, a lot of electricity is generated by nuclear power.

P: Exactly, those Swedish nuclear power stations along the coasts are a clear example of that. But all of a sudden, you have here a cooling tower right on top of a rock cliff. For me, it was a completely new image of Swedish nuclear power. And when I was told that the Farsta neighbourhood had its district heating supplied with the help of heavy water, the image seemed so ultra-modern that it could almost be fiction.

N: Are you saying that in Farsta they used a nuclear power station just like a thermal power station?

P: Yes. It's probably the world's only nuclear thermal power station. An extreme solution you might think, locating this kind of capacity inside a civil structure. "Atomic city" Farsta, towers above us like a beautiful image of the suburb as a modernistic dream.

N: Farsta is often considered to be a barometer for the entire country. In other words, if you look at the demographics, Farsta neatly coincides with the rest of Sweden. You might regard it as a miniature Sweden.

P: What could be more appropriate for the Swedish Nuclear Policy, and for Konsthall C²? However, besides these demographic and suggestive images, there is also duplicity in nuclear technology. It is claimed that you need nuclear power to generate energy, while at the same time everyone knows that nuclear technology serves other purposes. The primary purpose of the Farsta plant was to produce weapons. But despite this, I have obvious problems in repudiating such pragmatism. This was painfully apparent, not least, in conversation with Bengt. I strongly identify myself with each subject in all of my art conversations, and the

¹ Hasselberg was invited to exhibit *Nya vägar* at Skåne's Art Association in Malmö in the autumn 2003. In turn, he invited Henrik Andersson and Mats Eriksson. It was Andersson's *Music for White Cubes* that interested Hasselberg. A work that highlighted the problems of background music in public spaces and the gallery space in particular. Hasselberg chose to turn the concept inside out and directed the sound from the gallery into the public space outside (a car park, a pedestrian tunnel). Hasselberg's work, SCAFT, is based around Malmö's city planning from the point of view of the Swedish Road Administration's procedures for traffic separation from 1968.

² Konsthall C is located in one-half of the central laundry building on Cigarrvägen in Hökarängen. The laundry area occupies the other half. The concept is to recover the original idea of being neighbours and criticising the social art of recent years. The Hökarängen City Council is testing the possibility of renewing and solidifying the neighbour concept with the help of contemporary art.

journalist, Larsson, naturally can't let this observation pass without criticism in our talk at Index. It lends the work itself duplicity and self-criticism, which I appreciate, but I know many people have problems with it. After all, I'm clearly up to something when I identify myself with both the journalist who is trying to expose double-dealing, and Bengt Göransson who asks: Isn't it great, that we solved the matter this way? Given an irrevocable no, perhaps the end result would have been a bomb, but given freedom to act...

N: Bengt Göransson runs that thesis by you time after time in the conversation. In principle, he considered the double-dealing only as a positive thing. But your point is also that nuclear power is basically of interest because there is always an implicit duplicity. You say you have a nuclear power station because you need power, despite everyone knowing that you can make something else from it too.

P: Yes, but a thermal power plant is actually the closest you can get to building a military reactor. Primitive, low-intensity functionality and it shuts down in the summer, a lovely set-up for weapons-grade plutonium.

N: Let's bring Henrik into the conversation now. When did you first decide that you wanted to implement your idea, Henrik?

H: I had the idea for a long time. There was no reason at all in the beginning, except it was something that's been on my mind for ages and I just chose to do it. And then I had good cause to continue working on it. When you and Per invited me to participate, it wasn't hard to accept. The theme, or topic rather, of the exhibition makes it fit in really well. But I did think a lot about how my piece would work together with Per's. My reading of Per's work is that it starts as quite a local event, something very specific and contemporary for Sweden given the time and location, and then it gets a universal significance. Based on this, I think Per works with a particular inquiry and then allows it to achieve a universal significance. My work starts with a universal inquiry and then becomes more specific. A nuclear weapon's test is something that physically affects the entire earth. This exhibition gives us the opportunity to work with both the universal and the specific. That's my reading of the matter and I think it can work. The origins of my piece come from my interest in music and sound. More specifically, 20th century modernistic music. There was experimentation with technology and sequences. They continually referred to a universal ideal traced back to ancient Greece and mathematics. But John Cage put a stop to that. Music has a sound that can be traced to nature and you can follow that in his "4:33". A piece which is four minutes and thirty-three seconds long, of total silence. Cage says: "OK, now we're quiet." This happened sometime in the '60s.

N: If we say that far back in history, they read music and maths in relation to nature; that they tried to make something 'natural'. Then we surely have here – if I may cite a word Per frequently uses – a 'feedback' into nature. Literally, musically. And much more. When the sound renders the entire world into a sounding board.

H: And as a result, you cross nature – there is no outer limit for nature. Now the entire earth is rocked.

N: Exactly, this tune gets the entire earth rocking and that's something that cannot be read in nature – in that way it's not mathematical. It's an encroachment on nature, it abuses nature. And talking about sounding boards, it was apparent very early when seeing the two of you working together. Per's work strikes yours and there is a resonance in having a nuclear explosion going off regularly in conjunction with Per's work. And also vice versa, you can read

Henrik's nuclear explosion in relation to Per's work. Did this mean Henrik that you regarded your own work differently, when you heard about Per's work, what he was up to, that you then didn't quite know what context to use?

H: No, I don't think so. No more than thinking about how it would be perceived and suit the context.

N: It wasn't the case that when you thought of your own work in parallel with Per's, that it became clearer to you?

H: Sure, you could say that. Often it is much easier putting your work besides someone else's. Differences appear, despite the fact that we're working with the same topic, Per and I. The crucial thing in my work was the musical element.

H: What interests me is that certain element of quasi-science. As far as I know, no one has ever transformed the seismographic readings of a nuclear explosion into audible sound. It would be interesting to hear what the experts have to say about it.

N: Listening to it, you get the image of an explosion. It would be interesting to know how experts relate to it because they're used to regarding it in terms of curves and figures.

H: The ear, or listening by ear, is so imprecise compared to the eye.

N: But that's interesting, if you refer back to music. On paper, as a score, you'd say that even that is an exact science. But when it's audible it is no longer so exact. But most people would agree that it's better listening to music than staring at it on paper.

N: And you Per, how have you related to Henrik's work? Has it influenced the way you relate to your own work?

P: Yes. Andreas Gedin (member of the Index exhibition group) spoke about the importance of an 'absolute' work. That's difficult for me because I want to be able to slip in and out of precise meanings. Is it about the Swedish language or the Swedish nuclear weapons' programme? It was the same thing in Skåne. Henrik's work made the first impression on viewers, allowing them to find the right way into the work.

N: And here, Henrik's work plays a similar role. It's the first thing that visitors encounter, it's quite austere and sets a tone. It's about nuclear weapons, right?

P: Actually, nuclear weaponry is the lowest common denominator that influences both of the works, but it's there they meet and there you have the essence. I think it creates a freedom for both of us to seek other ends.

N: Henrik mentioned it's about other things stemming from this common denominator. The musical aspects. Your work is about much more than just the technical conditions needed to make nuclear weapons and that this happened in Sweden. Among other things it also deals with rhetoric.

P: I'm interested in making associations and translations. The political system constructed by the Social Democrats in Sweden is intricate and has many levels. I needed an issue in order to

gain entrance. The atomic bomb issue almost destroyed the Social Democratic party. It's interesting that Bengt denies this in our conversation, despite confirming it in other contexts.

N: I think it's a very nice conversation – it draws you in easily. Exciting to follow how these levels, which you spoke about, develop. You almost feel another sub-level emerging as Göransson compromises himself while speaking about the compromises of the Social Democrats.

H: Following through the policies of the Social Democrats, it seems obvious that Sweden should have had the bomb under their governance. How else could one remain independent among two superpowers, unless you have your own power.

N: The 'Third Way' is a popular notion in politics, an image that is applicable in many contexts. You are not dependent on one superpower or the other, as long as you stand between them and claim neutrality. However, like it or not, you're still wedged between two opposing systems. Then it is reasonable to maintain policies that are neither one nor the other, or actually both. In other words, you don't have the bomb, but you do have the means to make one. Necessity makes it pragmatic to run two different policies at once. You see this in the Social Democrat's entire Swedish Model.

H: Today you can talk about the collapse of the Social Democratic welfare state. Or more accurately, Social Democracy's logical termination. That it's up to a mixed economy to efficiently try to follow and manage things the best it can, be it the economy or the war machine.

N: Just take the fact that there is such a term as 'mixed economy', a system that incorporates both socialism and capitalism.

P: I'm really interested in this image of Sweden as the most modern country in the world, or most post-modern. Sweden has a multi-dimensional way of relating to things, enabling the big projects to get implemented along with several, single-dimension, parallel projects.

N: "A work can only be modern, if first it is post-modern" is Jean-François Lyotard's often used quote.³ And perhaps it applies to Swedish Social Democracy. Before it can be modern it must first be post-modern. It's like a construction relating to Lyotard's theory.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, 1982. First published in Sweden 1986 in the anthology "Svar på frågan: Vad är det postmoderna?", reprinted in Paletten #258/no. 3, 2004.