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Transsexuality and Surrealism in the Work of Christer Strömholm

Among Scandinavian photographers, Christer Strömholm has been most successful promoting the integration of photography into the art world.1 His solo exhibition 9 sekunder av mitt liv (9 Seconds of My Life), held in 1986 at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm, attracted 32,500 visitors.2 It could very well be described as Strömholm's definitive breakthrough as an artist, and perhaps the most important manifestation of photographic art in Sweden to date. Yet certain aspects of the interpretation of Strömholm's photos in relation to the art world remain unclear. On the one hand, they are classified under rubrics such as "subjective photography" and "the private image," suggesting the importance of Strömholm's personal life in his work. On the other hand, Strömholm's photography has also been discussed in the context of social realism, for instance in his book Vännerna från Place Blanche (The Friends from the Place Blanche). His images of the transsexuals of the Place Blanche in Paris have become an established prototype in Swedish documentary photography, playing an important role in the discourse on sexual politics in recent decades. Thus a social realistic reading stresses the importance of the subject matter and social engagement in Strömholm's work.

These two lines of discussion run parallel and are hard to reconcile. An alternative interpretive perspective is to see the images in relation to the aesthetics of surrealism. In the present chapter, I will attempt to produce such an interpretation, drawing together

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the two strands of discussion thus demonstrating that Strömholm's photographs comprise a single, coherent oeuvre.

Isolation and concealment

In his article "The Surrealist Image," the art historian Jan-Gunnar Sjölin maintains that the primary surrealist act is isolation. In this way the object is released, which opens it for different interpretations. In a collage, for example, the objects or images depicted are removed from their respective contexts. The main device employed by Christer Strömholm is in fact isolation, the isolation of the object, of part of the object, of the person, of the gaze, of the world, and of the image itself. It should be possible to see his work as a rhetorical digression from what is commonly referred to as the lifeworld, from the world we take for granted, the place where our body and our consciousness connect with the rest of the world.

By placing the object at the centre of the picture, Strömholm creates a margin. This margin is often accentuated by a second frame within the image, which once more separates the object from its context. (The photograph itself has of course already effected an initial separation.) This isolation is frequently emphasised by lighting: the pictures are darker at the corners than they are in the middle. However, for Strömholm, isolation is more than just a conceit of composition. It is not just to achieve a formalistic effect that he places his figures in the middle of the picture. His rhetoric seems instead to be directed downward, in that it tends to reify the objects and make them alien to us. We as viewers are banished from the "human" lifeworld to a world of discrete objects where context and intersubjectivity have lost their significance.

For Strömholm, isolation means more than just isolation on the imagistic level, or isolation of the object depicted from other objects or individuals. On a deeper level, concealment is often used, which further accentuates isolation. Concealment renders the object hard to identify; we are not allowed to complete the act of perception. Instead of the entire object we expect, we see only the point of view, thereby effectively alienating the viewer from the object (fig. 1).

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Overlap in the form of walls, gratings, and curtains, for example, is a device which Strömholm's pictures use to suggest to us that the world is a prison, or that the world is a picture hiding the real world from being viewed. The pictures usually contain an obstacle that blocks the gaze and makes further action impossible; they are impermeable. Even the subject depicted might be purposely insignificant, abominable or mundane.

Often, the object of Strömholm's photography is contained in a "box," enclosed on all sides. Regardless of whether there are further frames within the image, the image plane exudes a reserved air. Once again, there is also the element of concealment, which renders the object more or less inaccessible to the viewer. Thus the use of frames within the image is in some sense connected with the obstruction of sight. The viewer senses this box, a box that cannot be opened. The pictures are quite simply mysterious and the mystery that most of us feel when viewing Strömholm's images results from this combination of isolation and concealment. We might compare Strömholm's work to an early surrealist photograph, Man Ray's L'énigme d'Isidore Ducasse (1920), which is at once a surrealist object and a photograph depicting an unknown object concealed beneath a blanket.

Strömholm's use of old, worn-out items as objets trouvés is another of his isolating devices; such an object loses whatever remains of its original meaning when it is wrested from its context and from its relationship to other objects. This is the true surrealist manner; to remove objects from their lifeworld (we recall the surrealists' enthusiasm for the flea market) so as to turn them into discoveries is to instill them with new life. Walter Benjamin has compared the surrealist preoccupation with "the ruins of the bourgeoisie" with the Renaissance preoccupation with classical ruins. However, Strömholm's objects have little to do with nostalgia. Retrospection is not really his aim; he does not seek to evoke times past. His images of dilapidated household objects allow no room for "stories." Instead, they are lifted out of time itself. If there is a story told by Strömholm's photographs, it is a transgressive one, pointing toward emptiness or death.

*Images of other images and signs*

If we accept the notion that the typical photographic image is referential, that it is a picture representing the world, we realize that many of Strömholm's photographs depict the world itself as an image or a stage. What we are shown is often yet another sign of
something else; a sculpture, a linguistic fragment, or another image is reproduced. And even before the picture has been taken, Strömholm's subjects are often already mediated, removed to a second degree of fictionality, insofar as they are derived from the world of the variety show or represent other images or signs. In other words, the images are meta- images – images of other images or signs. When reproduced in a picture, the second degree of fictionality becomes accentuated in its theatricality and pictoriality. Theatrical "masks" embody the mystery that is humanity. An image, as an image, evokes reality as an image rather than as reality itself. An image presented as an image stresses the way in which images conceal true reality. "All the world's a stage" – this metaphor elucidates Strömholm's pictures of variety artists, but also his images of transsexuals, insofar as they, too, are signs – men signifying women.

For, indeed, isolation and concealment pervade these images as well. Critical discussions have tended to view these pictures as Strömholm's most accessible work, and thus define them via the context of social realism. However, the transsexuals portrayed are isolated in that they comprise a social minority. They are further isolated because each one is presented separately and not in association with pimps and johns. Here Strömholm departs from the usual method of documentary reportage. The device of concealment is present in the images of the transsexuals, in that they also project a surface (female appearance), hiding a secret (male attributes) which can only be dimly discerned.

As surrealistic gestures, involving the use of devices such as isolation and concealment, the images lose their social character, and we are able to interpret them in a completely different way. The photographer's engagement on behalf of this marginalized group is no longer as evident, because now mystery (masculinity) is the effect suggested by the rhetoric which the images have conjured up. What the viewer first perceives (femininity) must be estranged in such a way so that the hidden male attributes are projected onto the female ones the viewer expects to see. Conversely, the transsexuals themselves strive to erase their masculinity in terms of gender as well as sex. If we look closely at a photograph of one of the transsexuals, Nana (fig. 2), we may weigh the actual importance or unimportance of "her" Adam's apple.
As a statement of liberalized sexual politics in support of transsexuality, the appearance of this Adam's apple would be either unimportant or denied. But in a surrealistic context it is a highly significant, concealed and secret attribute of
masculinity, projected onto the surface of a perfect femininity, estranging and disturbing it. The photographs thus do not unequivocally side with the transsexuals in the struggle of sexual politics. This should hardly be seen as a weakness, but rather as an expression of the work of art's independence in relation to its subject.

The pictures of transsexuals taken by Strömholm in this way of interpreting them no longer depict a social and geographical "reality," to wit, the actual transsexuals at the Place Blanche. Rather, the transsexuals are surrealistic in the sense that they seek to unite what cannot be united, conjoining male and female in the same body. They become rhetorical in relation to the expectations of our lifeworld. Furthermore, they become what classic rhetoric calls oxymorons, conjunctions of contradictory terms.

**Surrealism: Breton and Bataille**

The second surrealistic manoeuvre, André Breton's favourite device, is dépaysement, which involves placing the isolated object in another world or milieu. In *Communicating Vessels*, Breton writes:

> To compare two objects as far distant as possible one from the other or, by any other method, to confront them in a brusque and striking manner, remains the highest task to which poetry can ever aspire. Its unequaled, unique power should tend more and more to practise drawing out the concrete unity of the two terms placed in relation and to communicate to each of them, whatever it may be, a vigour that it lacked as long as it was considered in isolation.  

However, dépaysemens rarely occur in Strömholm's work, at least not in the Bretonian sense of unifying separate worlds in a soaring rhetoric which optimistically seeks to create an ethereal, "transparent," and thus superior world. Breton describes Surrealism as an irreversible process where the development goes towards that which is put in place of the other. He writes:

> Let notice be taken: The analogical image, to the degree that it illuminates in the brightest way partial similarities, will not be traduced in terms of equation. It moves between the two realities present in a determined way which is never reversible. From the first of these realities to the second, it marks a vital tension turned possibly towards health, pleasure, quietude, given thanks, consented usages. It has as its mortal enemies the deprecative and the depressing.  

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One might imagine the social realistic reading of Strömholm's transsexuals to be in line with Breton's optimistic view of the dissolution of oppositions and his vision of a future, transparent society. Breton has also written "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak." Unifying opposites could in this case tally perfectly with a transsexual identity.

However, since the chief devices in Strömholm's images are isolation and concealment, this is where he is content to stop. He is not interested in creating a better and more unified world along the lines of Breton, but is rather more akin to another surrealist, Georges Bataille, whose ideas of mutilation, sacrificial rites, separation, and downward rhetoric lead to an anti-humanistic stance, due to his strong emphasis on materialism. Instead of humanizing, Bataille chooses to animalize and to reify. He suggests "an irruption of excremental forces (the excessive violation of modesty, positive algolagnia, the violent excretion of the sexual object coinciding with a powerful or tortured ejaculation, the libidinal interest in cadavers, vomiting, defecation...)."

Bataille uses the word *informe*, formless, to obliterate the supremacy of concepts and classification. Bataille regards reality as something shapeless and intangible. Under the banner of the *informe*, Bataille contends that "affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit." This contrasts with Breton's ascending, spiritualized, and ultimately optimistic thinking, which Bataille considers far too idealistic.

Presumably, Bataille would not be pleased that a social liberation process could lead to the universal acceptance of transsexuals, since the constant transgression of taboos is for him more important than eventual unity. For Bataille, the transgression of limits presupposes taboos. Thus, what is most important is not unity, as it is for Breton, but rather the opposition of rhetorical polarities – in other words, oxymorons.

In Strömholm's photographs of transsexuals, masculinity as well as femininity remain intact and the effect of the images rests on the rhetoric arising from of this basic human

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distinction. It is the borderline separating the two that constitutes his pervasive theme. Isolation was a device often used by the photographers gathered around Bataille and his magazine *Documents* in the 30s – even in the form of the extreme close-up. The extreme close-up also occurs in the work of Strömholm, showing male and female sexual organs and anus. Bataille's downward rhetoric, animalisation and reification, the formless speaking is also present in Strömholm’s photographs of animal and human cadavers, throw-ups in the street, deformed human bodies, a dying bull with blood flowing out of its mouth at a bullfight, a flowing sewer, etc.

*Subjectivity and the notion of "picture Self"*

What about the "privacy" and "subjectivity" often ascribed to the work of Strömholm? On the one hand, lingering Romantic notions may confirm that the subjectivity of the artist controls the work of art. On the other, "reference" is often highlighted in photography, since a photograph is supposed to display reality as it is. Thus the notion of *index* is strongly emphasized by the semioticians of photography, from Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag to Philippe Dubois and Rosalind Krauss. Photography is seen as the imprint or emanation of a past event. However, subjectivity as well as index may be problematical notions in the photography of Strömholm and in photography in general.

From a functional view of signs, Roman Jakobson has argued that different components of the communication model discernible in a certain message or work. Thus we speak of "aesthetic function" when the sign itself is focused upon, in particular its plane of expression. When the sender is focused upon we refer to "emotive function," and "conative function" when the receiver is emphasized. Other referential functions are highlighted when reality is at the centre of perception (further functions also exist but they will not be considered in the present context). Below we shall problematize the notion of subjectivity in the work of Strömholm.

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9 One of his exhibitions was called "Privata bilder" (Private Pictures) and one of his books has the title *Till minnet av mig själv* (To the Memory of Myself). Very often his photo books contain biographies.
Fig. 3. Christer Strömholm, *With Peter*. One viewer is depicted and the other is implied. In Strömholm 1983.

Returning to Strömholm's photographs of variety artists, we observe one particularly interesting movement. In two of his most well-known images, *With Peter* (fig. 3) and *The
Boy and the Fishnet Stocking (fig. 4), we detect the presence of two viewers. One is located in the space depicted, i.e. in the picture itself, while the other (the implied viewer of the scene) can be found in the referential space, immediately outside the space depicted.

Fig. 4. Christer Strömholm, The Boy and the Fishnet Stocking. One viewer is depicted and the other is implied. In Christer Strömholm, Konsten att vara där (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1991).

depicted. One might claim that these photographs are failures, in that they do not quite succeed in achieving the requisite isolation. As already noted, Strömholm prefers to gather information at the centre of the photograph. Yet in these images, the objects are distributed over the picture surface, and some are cropped off by the border of the photograph. The individual viewing these photographs is separated from the object due to the presence of a viewer within the image itself, thereby usurping, as it were, "my" place and relegating me to the status of secondary viewer.

This secondary viewer cannot come close to the object. Nor can the viewer within the picture who is frustrated by the concealing effect. In The Boy and the Fishnet Stocking, the variety scene depicted represents another level of fictionality in relation to
the audience. Besides, the woman being watched by the boy exists outside the picture, in the referential space, cropped off as she is by the edge of the photograph, which may imply that the woman is in fact a figment of the boy's imagination. In *With Peter*, the man watching the "snake lady" is unable to reach her, because she is encased in glass. Further, she, too, represents another degree of fictionality, because she is a variety artist and he is a member of the audience. In other words, the snake lady is isolated. Moreover, the presence of a rival viewer somehow renders the photograph less interesting for what might be called the *picture self*, the self of the *implied viewer*.

Be that as it may, in many other instances – in fact, in most of Strömholm's pictures – the viewer within the photograph has disappeared and the picture self, the implied viewer of the depiction, is directly confronted with the concealing effect (fig. 5). With
Fig. 5. Christer Strömholm, *The Leopard Lady*. The leopard lady is isolated from the audience in a "scene." The concealing effect is working in the "leopard dots" of her body. The picture self is confronted with the concealment. In Strömholm 1967.
the notion of the picture self, I wish to characterize a position within the image that can be assumed by sender and viewer alike. The picture self is whoever sees what the picture represents, and who accordingly remains unseen. And although unseen, in Strömholm's world this individual is often the most important person contained in the image. In other words, the picture self is not just an individual depicted in the image. In Strömholm's photographs, the picture self is often a person who experiences alienation and who is isolated from the ordinary lifeworld in which the rest of us participate. Most of Strömholm's pictures illustrate the curtailed perspective of the picture self, who struggles to discern the objects that appear before him. The picture self is thus a dramatized figure who need not be identical with the photographer, just as the protagonist of a novel need not be identical with its author.

Given the isolation of the object on the picture plane, and the concealment of the deeper level by means of gratings, screens, or some kind of surface running parallel with it in many of Strömholm's photographs, the picture self can directly confront the discontinuity that being human entails. The picture self is now no longer just a witness comfortably removed from the event, but rather a participant in the drama. The viewer inside the image is evicted and the main character is now the picture self, the viewer just outside the depicted space who watches the events unfolding therein.

What has happened is that the relationship between left and right in the photograph, from the viewer depicted to a more or less hidden object, has instead been transported to a deeper level. The hidden object has been placed at the centre of the picture and the viewer has been shifted from the depicted space to an implied position that is the referential space. This means that the viewer has become invisible, has become the person looking at the picture, in other words the picture self, you or me. Moreover, this constitutes a better solution in terms of gestalt psychology, because the problem of the image can be solved with greater elegance and simplicity, yet with sustained complexity.

Thus an analysis of subjectivity in the work of Strömholm exposes a more complex subjectivity that is not only centered around the photographer/artist. The photographer can be seen as a highly active and creative technician, a dramaturge or set designer, rather than the actor in the drama, the alienated and passive picture self. As the initial receiver, the photographer can momentarily place himself/herself in the position of the picture self, but so can the receiver.
The receiver can also be delegated two roles. On the one hand, the tangible receiver placed in a gallery or cinema or at home flipping through a book of photographs. On the other hand, there is a conative picture self (not identical with the photographer's picture self). In looking at the picture the tangible receiver is mentally relocated to a conative referential space that can be imagined just outside the depicted space of the photograph. In assuming this alienated persona, he or she must momentarily disregard the photographer and his/her photographic equipment in the "real" referential space. Thus there must be at least two referential spaces: one "real," emotive referential space and one imagined, conative referential space (fig. 6).

Fig. 6. The relationship between depicted space and referential space. The referential space can be separated in an emotive and conative referential space.

Photographic imperialism and the problem of index in photography
Subjectivity is strongly emphasized by both Strömholm himself and contemporary critics. Yet it seems to be the subjectivity of the photographer that is essential to his photographic method during exposure instead of the integrity of the personality of those depicted. His method thus can be seen as a device to cross the proxemic thresholds separating individuals. In relation to efforts at liberating transsexuals, the work of
Strömholm can be seen as a kind of photographic imperialism. This notion can be compared with the way in which news photographers step over the proxemic thresholds of people in the midst of the personal suffering that makes for news. Yet in the case of Strömholm, the characterization as photographic imperialism should not be seen as derogatory. Instead it is an acknowledgement of the strength of the "commentary" of his photographs and of the importance of his oeuvre. It is the power with which he invests the sensuality of the transsexuals.

Often, the receiver is expected to revive the photograph in relation to the moment of exposure and to the photographer. This conception is often based on considering the photograph an index. Photography deals with what once actually happened. The photographer is seen as the guarantor of authentic exposure. The indexical situation at the moment of exposure becomes fetishized when the photographer, on the battlefield, in exotic milieux and as in the role of flaneur is considered a hero who, under often trying circumstances, transfers the object to the emulsion of the film. The problem is that the photographer, just like the author of a novel, is often a non-textual subject.

However, a semiotic investigation by the semiotician Göran Sonesson reveals that the indexicality between photograph, camera and photographer is secondary, and possibly later, addition to the fundamental pictorial iconicity.\(^1\) At first the receiver must comprehend that the picture is a photograph, that it resembles objects in a lifeworld. After that the photograph may (or may not) be seen as an index of something that once happened and, moreover, of a photographer participating in the situation of exposure. One can see what a photograph depicts without knowing exactly where or when it was taken. Thus in the semiotics of photography, iconicity is primary to indexicality. The present author believes that it is the notion of index in photography that compels us to see Christer Strömholms' photographs of transsexuals as documentary, which prevents us from seeing them as rhetorical and surrealistic.

In summation, we have discussed the interpersonal function of the photography of Strömholm in terms of a proposed congruence between the emotive and conative referential axes in a complicated process of communication that raises semiotic constraints for the realization of an existential perspective (fig. 7). We cannot speak of

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"subjective photography" without mentioning semiotic conditions and sign systems and the series of links that make the communicative act possible.

Fig. 7. Subjectivity in the photography of Christer Strömholm. The interpersonal function in terms of a proposed congruence between the emotive and conative referential axes.

*The predicament of the "picture Self"*

The situation in which we, as "picture selves," find ourselves in Strömholm's photographs can also be called *la condition humaine* – a situation in which the intersubjectivity and dialogicity of the ordinary lifeworld is rendered ineffectual and there arises a state of existential loneliness; the stark condition of things, with a minimum of narrative. Just as interior monologue and direct speech have ousted the omniscient narrator in the modern novel, the picture self in Strömholm's photography, with its unique perspective, replaces the customary referential image and the concomitant all-seeing eye that once promised to show "reality."

Strömholm's pictures provide a ready-made position for the subject. In the preferred reading, i.e., the interpretation that the sender (Strömholm) seeks to elicit, viewers must
adapt to sender-oriented expectations. At the same time, they are invited to take their fate in their own hands. Here, then, we are confronted by a complex social relationship. To truly become "yourself," you must leave yourself behind, along with your place in your immediate lifeworld. It is as though the pictures uttered a dictatorial edict – "You must be free!" The viewer can of course reject the sender's demand, but then we would no longer be dealing with the preferred reading.

To isolate and to conceal is to disavow the way in which objects are unified in the lifeworld. They become charged with a certain meaninglessness, because reality truly is elusive and hidden. It is only by recognizing the condition of extreme particularity and separateness that the picture self is able to discern its image which then reveals the world as elusive, hidden and strange, because in an image, the separate perspective is one of discontinuity.

The self is enclosed in a body that needs the Other, but is unable to reach it. Separateness entails absence, the absence of reality in its totality. It is not through unification in life but through distinctness in death that we can be united. Death is the absolute referent. There is always something missing. What is shown is not intended to be shown, but rather something else. The picture self is ill at ease in its mangled and intermittent state, its human vantage point. Images intend to show something else: that an image does not represent reality, but rather that "reality is an image." Reality, as we experience it via our senses, is a screen, a facade, a veil or a mask hiding the monstrosity that is reality. Strömholm would like to show us what lies beyond the range of the human eye, the ultimate referent that exposes the impossibility of the image. What we see is a show, and what cannot be seen is reality. The image is a substitute for death, for freedom and for the cessation of separation. The subject intended is not the subject that is shown but, strictly speaking, all subjects at once. The image intended is not just that particular image, but finally an image of coexisting perspectives, the "total" picture.

If the "dark" surrealism of Bataille, centered around discontinuity, downward rhetoric, animalization, reification and death, is a climate in 20th century aesthetics and thinking, then Strömholm is a weather in this climate.

Bibliography


Expressen, 24 June 1986: 4. Article title and author missing!


Illustrations

Fig. 1. Christer Strömholm, "Isolation and concealment," in Christer Strömholm, Poste Restante (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag, 1967).

Fig. 2. Christer Strömholm, Nana, in Christer Strömholm, Vännerna från Place Blanche (Stockholm: ETC Förlag, 1983).

Fig. 3. Christer Strömholm, With Peter. One viewer is depicted and the other is implied. In Strömholm 1983.

Fig. 4. Christer Strömholm, The Boy and the Fishnet Stocking. One viewer is depicted and the other is implied. In Christer Strömholm, Konsten att vara där (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1991).

Fig. 5. Christer Strömholm, The Leopard Lady. The leopard lady is isolated from the audience in a "scene." The concealing effect is working in the "leopard dots" of her body. The picture self is confronted with the concealment. In Strömholm 1967.

Fig. 6. The relationship between depicted space and referential space. The referential space can be separated in an emotive and conative referential space.
Fig. 7. Subjectivity in the photography of Christer Strömholm. The interpersonal function in terms of a proposed congruence between the emotive and conative referential axes.