An Attempt at Visually Exhausting a Place in Malmö

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Abstract

The work presented here is a photo-essay with images of, from, around and beyond a local square in Malmö; images that emerged from visual ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in September 2017. This fieldwork was developed around the idea of what a visual representation of the Scandinavian city would be, trying to look at it from a situated perspective that explored an ordinary place. In doing so, this photo-essay does not present a linear story. It rather describes the chosen place from a multifaceted perspective, each facet being a photograph of an object: a walking frame, a fungus, a flowerpot, a lamppost, a painting on a wall, a number, a water tank, a bird, a bench, a statue, a tower, a bridge, and so on. The essay explores the urban departing from Georges Perec's attempt at exhausting of a place in Paris. In this case, however, a different methodology was performed. Rather than sitting in a café and writing up what was observed, I made visual registers and 'followed the actors' involved in those images, opening in each depiction a window for a new enquiry. The urban is, hence, presented as a subjective experience. It is framed, fragmented and mainly relational. The result is an 'actor-network' in which each image is a whole in itself and also part of other representations. The main objective of the essay is to present an open inconclusive body of questions—rather than a closed conclusive body of answers—that, ultimately, would give the reader a 'partial' yet meaningful impression of one city.

Keywords

Visual Narratives of the ordinary city

> "There are many things in Place Saint-Sulpice; […] A great number, if not the majority, of these things have been described, inventoried, photographed, talked about, or registered. My intention in the pages that follow was to describe the rest instead: that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds." (Perec 2010: 3)

With this endeavour begins Georges Perec's attempt at exhausting a place in Paris. In October 1974 he spent three days sitting in several coffee shops around the square of Saint-Sulpice, looking around and writing down all the ordinary details he managed to capture: a woman with a green suit, a dog walker, the bus number 86, the same woman walking in the opposite direction with a plastic bag full of groceries, and so on and so forth. Perec's essay gets to a point that it seems nothing else could be described. Yet, his attempt at exhausting a place was framed in those specific three days, in the hours he sat in the cafés and refers to the specific situations, events, images and circumstances Perec managed to experience.

The aim of this photo-essay is similar to Perec's: to attempt at exhausting a place. However, the challenge in this case was to add three conditions to that attempt. First, the place had to be a Scandinavian place. Those conditions emerged from 'The New Urban Citizen' symposia co-organised by University College London and Malmö University in 2015–16, where I proposed the development of this exploration project. The idea was to develop a project that explored a place to be chosen in Malmö for some time, in order to attempt for a generic exploration of what Scandinavian city would look like, and how could it be represented. The second condition was the timeframe. To do the job we were awarded with a grant that limited the scope and timeframe of the enquiry: I could spend one week in Malmö for my fieldwork. And the third condition, also emerging from the workshop was that the attempt had to be visual. The workshop ended up framing

its exploration around visual narratives and counternarratives of the city. In that sense, a photo-essay was the ideal format for the commission.

As a result, two representations have been produced and are presented here: a text and a group of visual compositions. On the one hand, the text is a linear narrative that sometimes accompanies the images and other times expands beyond. The task of the text is not to be the guide that explains the images; it works on its own. Yet certain descriptions in the text support certain understandings of the images. Still, the text and the images do not necessarily run in parallel. On the other hand, collages are presented, each with several images. The idea behind those compositions is that they provide enough narrative information to be followed on their own. Images suggest paths that might be linked to other images. Those links, however, are not linear like the text, and the narrative paths are multiple and entangled. The images are descriptive in themselves and in relation to other images, but those relationships are not provided. Hence, the construction of the final understanding of the place we are attempting to exhaust here is up to the reader. That is, objectivity is not sought; rather subjective interpretation is encouraged. Thus, reading paths are to be chosen.

Framing an entangled narrative

We usually tend to think there are two ways to depict a city, two apparently antagonist yet complementary paths that would eventually present seemingly opposed versions of its identity. The first one could be an abstraction of daily life, a proposal that could represent any city in its 'ordinary' neighbourhood life, far away from tourist attractions and eventful sceneries. The second one, on the contrary, could be a trip that reflects on the representative places of one specific city, in this case, Malmö; a narrative that would delve into its 'iconic' symbols and places. It seems that in depicting a city one has to commit to one or the other; that there is no middle ground. However, the visual narrative I propose here goes against such assumption. It is a narrative that dissolves that duality and opens up other multiple ways of representing a city. It is a narrative that combines both representations; that is, it does not choose between the abstraction of the ordinary or the specificity of the iconic.

The ordinary, according to Michael Lambek, 'happen[s] without calling undue attention to itself' (Lambek 2010: 2). It is 'deeply embedded [..] in the common sense ways we distinguish among various kinds of actors or characters, kinds of acts and manners of acting' (Lambek 2010: 2). In that sense, the ordinary could be found anywhere, for it is not revealed unless we shed light on it. On the contrary, icons, following Peter Nas and Rivke Jaffe, are elements that 'have become representative'(Nas and Jaffe 2009: 47); that is, they have acquired such a condition after a process of having been repeatedly represented. In consequence, objects and places are not ordinary nor iconic in themselves. They are what people make out of them. It is in the relation between all the actors (both objects and individuals) that such perception is built.

To merge the iconic and the ordinary, two ideas are tested in the essay: ordinary icons—i.e. icons that emerge from ordinary life, elements that could have been iconic symbols of the city, but have been somehow relegated to mundane spaces and hence intertwined with ordinary life—and the ordinariness of icons—that is, ordinary elements, people, practices and materials that emerge in and around recognised and recognisable icons and their situated representations. In doing so, they become intertwined: the ordinary is revealed through its invisibility and given recognition, and the iconic is recognised through its ordinariness.

In developing the images, the ordinary and the iconic are understood as relational entities. Drawing from an ANT sensitivity (Callon 1986; Latour 2005), we could argue that everything is relational, for nothing is independent and autonomous. Hence, its representation should resemble such relational nature. Things are what they are in relation to other things and entities. And here, the concept of the actor-network (Callon 2001) could help us to read the visual compositions I present in that sense: everything—be it a material, a human, or a non-human—is an actor and a network in itself. Namely, as actors, entities have the capacity to play a role, to be agentic, to act within a social relationship; and as networks, entities also include other entities, for they mediate, translate and relate to other elements and objects too. This concept is used to build the visual narrative that, rather than closing and constraining meanings within singular frames, open paths of non-linear

interpretation. Among those multiple frames we will find the ordinary and the iconic, and we will discover both are intrinsically interconnected.

Images and their framings are relational materials; they relate to contexts and elements that, even if possibly situated outside the frame, are also part of them. John Berger (2013) argues that photography is more than just its content. That is why images are composed here. The compositions, in their materiality, are fragmented and related, like Walter Benjamin's narrative in *One-Way Street* (2009), where he engages with the construction of a place through fragments, but avoids providing the links between them that are only suggested. He shows situations of a seemingly specific street, yet he builds the narrative with fragments from multiple places. To image that street, he does not provide the way in which the reader has to link those situations and fragments he describes. It is the reader that has to reconstruct it and build it. Here, the framing of several photographs suggests something similar. Frames bind specific elements within them, focusing on certain meanings, and the combination of those fragmented meanings build relational entities that escape individuality.

ANT also provides a methodological motto that links with such a way of understanding representation: 'Follow the actors!' Bruno Latour (2005) would suggest. Namely, look for the agency of things! Consider how things interact! Frames could also be understood as windows or doors; they open up enquiries. In reading images, attention needs to be addressed to multiple material issues, not only to the content itself. The material mediation is significant: the camera used, the time of exposure, and all the technological post-production. In that sense, Bradley Garrett's 'glass geographies' (2014) might help us to understand framing from a critical point of view. Glass geographies are topologies where relations are built through glass—monitors, screens, and the like. In that regard, Garrett also relates such geographies to research methodologies, and suggested that ethnographic explorations of the urban need 'quick adaptation to the physicality of the practice'(2010, 2011); hence, equipment is crucial, for it mediates the situated emerging social relations of the field (Laurier et al. 2008). Hence, the ethnographic materials used to frame the field are crucial.

For my fieldwork, I travelled with a computer, a digital camera, a

reflex analogic camera and a tablet; devices that would help me relate to the field visually and would also 'put me in place'. My initial idea was not to make a 'complete' account of the place; first and foremost, because that is not possible. Rather, I acknowledged my limitations and bias and I tried to take advantage of them. My background as an architect and urban researcher directed me towards a particular way of apprehending reality, a way that somehow underlined my 'situated knowledge'(Haraway 1991). Not knowing the place beforehand, I had in mind the kinds of things that I would expect to find. My aim of taking with me a number of devices was to produce a variety of visual registers that would allow me to reflect upon my experience afterwards. I only had one week and rather than—or better, in addition to—taking notes sitting on a café watching life pass by, I drew, took photographs and shot videos, and I walked around trying to find traces of practices in order to find my own framing of the space. The equipment was part of my ethnographic performance and as such it participated in the framing beyond the specific moment of registering.

The exploration of the idea of framing organises this essay. In visual research, and in particular for visual ethnography (Banks 2001; Pink 2007), the decision of what to include and what to exclude from the image presented is relevant. To frame I used three different methods: photography, video, and drawing. During my trip the three modes gave me insights into the place, especially in regard to my own recognition within the fieldwork.

In taking a photograph, the movement of the camera in relation to the position of the object, the use of zoom, or alternatively walking towards the object, standing or crouching when choosing the right angle exposes the photographer and reveals the researcher's intentions. The camera points to the researcher as an intruder, a possible nuance that disturbs everyday life; but such disturbance also enhances the object framed, it shows a subjective interest—the researcher's one—in an element or a situation that could have gone unnoticed. In recording a video, the framing also entails time; time is framed. The registering of one period of time against another, deciding when the action begins and when it ends, also shows a sort of framing that would ultimately be edited afterwards. That is, it would be framed again in accordance to a

message. In drawing or painting, the framing also entails the decision of what to include. That is, the level of detail to be included in the depiction, and the type of lines and colours that should be reproduced. In addition, when drawing, invention plays an important role; as far as the instant cannot be reproduced—like in photography—the act of drawing allows for a certain deformation and adaptation of the object, as we will see. Therefore, framing is explored from the intrinsic capacities of the visual methods used.

Hence, the images of this photo-essay frame specific situations in multiple ways, and those ways of framing also shaped my relationship to the field. That is why I argue that frames and images are actor-networks, for they include what is beyond; they not only refer to the specific object depicted, but also to the previous and the following ones, and the process of their registration. Maybe, in a corner of one picture the reader will recognise the tree of the picture that is placed next to it (or several pages later), and also the glance of someone not really understanding what is going on. This is how I have tried to frame the city.

Nydala square and four paintings on a wall

In September 2017, I travelled to Malmö and stayed there for a week. Arriving at the city, I looked for an ordinary place, a location abstract enough to give clues as to what a Scandinavian city would look like, but not necessarily refer to a specific city. To do so, with the help of a fellow Swedish researcher, I searched for a place in the outskirts of Malmö. I visited three locations and chose Nydalatorget (Nydala square) for it was a pleasant place to spend a week.

The square was at the core of Nydala neighbourhood, an area in the southwest of Malmö built in the early 1960s occupying former farm land. The development was built with buildings between four and eight stories high. In the centre of the development was a park with public facilities that divided the neighbourhood in two different areas, north and south. The neighbourhood could be reached easily from the centre of the city by bike or by bus. Nydala was what could be regarded as an 'ordinary' place accommodating working class neighbours.

In the northern part of the development, a square meant to be the commercial core of the development was built, surrounded by convenience stores and cafés, serving neighbours for their basic needs. The square was landmarked with a thirteen-storey-high building. Surrounding it, there were three cafés, one fruit shop, a post-office, a gym, a municipal office, a pharmacy, a hair-dresser's salon, a supermarket, a kindergarten, and a clothing store. The square was squared in shape. A cobblestone pavement enhanced the geometry, cut across diagonally by a bicycle path with intense traffic. There was one sculpture on one side and a fountain in the middle, and several trees in the perimeter. There were also benches, bins, lampposts, flowerpots, and even a public bicycle pump.

While exploring the square, I found four paintings. They were on a wall on the back of the supermarket facing Nydala's Park. I discovered them on my second day on site, while strolling around the area trying to understand its periphery.

The wall was made of yellow bricks with a patch of grass on its front along a side path of the park. It was about three metres high and had no windows. The entrance of the supermarket was on the square, and the only feature in the façade facing the park that could give the idea that the building was in use was a ventilation grill. Other than that, the wall was just an ordinary blank yellow brick wall. However, surprisingly, four elements made it different from any other wall in the area: it had four paintings attached to it.

The four paintings presented four different scenes: a bridge over the sea, what seemed to be an infrastructure with an UFO-like shape, a building with a tram in the front, and a lake in a park. I recognised the bridge immediately as the Øresundsbron (Øresund bridge), the fixed link between Copenhagen and Malmö, connecting Denmark and Sweden. The UFO-like shape construction was the Hyllie Tower—a well-known water storage tower built in the 1970s. But the other two images seemed less iconic to me and much more ordinary. Only after some internet research did I manage to find out what they were. The building with a tram was the Museispårvägen Malmö (Tram Museum), and the park was Pilldammsparken, a park near the centre of the city.

So, while searching for an ordinary place, I ended up finding elements

that encouraged me to relate to Malmö's iconic identity. Understanding that such relationships were not to be avoided, I opened up my enquiry. The paintings allowed me to establish a dialogue between two ways of representing the city. To do so, I decided to visit the places of the painting in order to nourish a dialogue between these representations.

Outside the frame

My first visit outside the square was to the Tram Museum. The painting included the building of the Museum, a tram, and three green-hued buildings with a particular roof construction. In the foreground and the background there was vegetation. The location was close to the city centre, near the museum of the city. When I arrived, more than interested in comparing what the painting depicted and what I could see, I was struck by what the painting excluded, that is, what was 'unframed' and missing from the painting.

At the same location of the museum, there was also a fish market. On the right-hand side of the road—that in the painting seemed to be more of an esplanade—there were several stalls, in what seemed to be old fishing huts, similar to the ones on the left hand side of the painting. There were cars parked, getting in and out a dead-end street. Drivers stopped for few minutes to buy what was regarded as the best fish of the city. At the end of the road there was a little port with fishing boats too, and a building that was not in the painting. On the back of the fishing houses there was another museum with a huge submarine on the yard. However, the most important absence to me was the Turning Torso tower, one of the most iconic buildings in Malmö; the tower should be on the background on the right, but it was missing from the painting.

I could think of two reasons why. One could be the Turning Torso did not exist when the painting was done, or when the photograph/reference image used to do the painting was done. The image then would refer to a period of time before 2005 (when the skyscraper was inaugurated). The other possibility was that the author or authors deliberately excluded the Turning Torso from the frame. In both cases, the absence of such an iconic symbol was relevant for our discussion.

Why would the author(s) avoid using the most symbolic icon of its own city in what seems to be a representation of it? And then, were indeed the paintings on the wall an intentional representation of the city? If not, what were they trying to depict?

Here our focus is not on the reasons for framing, but the capacities framing presents to shape representations. Excluding icons change the meaning of the painting. The practice of framing deviates the attention towards certain elements while excluding others. By interrogating exclusion, the images and their relationships to their contexts begin to make sense.

Practicing framing

In Nydala square there was a small statue of a girl sitting and holding her legs with her arms. It is called *Inkaprinsessa* [Inca Princess] and is a work by Per Torsten Fridh done in 1967, a few years after the completion of the buildings of the square (Tykesson and Malmö kulturmiljö 2002). For me, the sculpture was very powerful and projected a feeling somewhere between happiness and sadness. Her smile was placid, yet tense, depending on the light, the sun and the rain. It was placed in one of the edges of the square, and its podium was a little bit twisted in relation to the squared geometry of the place, as if those who placed it there wanted it to relate to something specific, to generate some sort of geometric tension. It was placed over one line of the pavement and very close to a sewage drain. The position was odd and intriguing. The back of the sculpture faced the centre of the square, where a fountain was located, an area with no specific interest. On the last day of my field trip, when the sun finally shone, I realised she turned her back to the sun too. The girl turned her head towards her left with her hair hanging on her right side; she seemed to be narrowing her eyes to avoid the sunshine, but her current position did not make sense to me. Looking at MKB Konstguide (Aunér 2006)—the art guide of the municipal public housing association—I understood the tension. Its original position was with her face facing the sun towards the centre of the square.

The *Inkaprinsessa* could be an icon, I thought; it had enough qualities in itself to be considered a symbolic representation of the place. It was

a powerful public art piece. However, for some reason, I had the feeling that the sculpture was somehow neglected.

From a subjective point of view, a symbol, understood as a representative element of something—namely, a city, a place, a neighbourhood—, could be any element. One could choose whatever element to represent something—a material, a statue, a building, a construction, a flag, a colour, a sign—yet it needs to be agreed with others for something to become an icon, to be a part of a common understanding. As already pointed out, an icon is an element that has 'become representative'(Nas and Jaffe 2009: 47). And to do so, it needs to bring attention to it; it needs to be the centre of attention at some point, even if temporarily.

In Malmö, we could say that nowadays, its Turning Torso skyscraper is a representative symbol of the city, an icon; likewise, the Little Mermaid sculpture (Den lille havfrue) is representative of Copenhagen itself. The Little Mermaid is symbolic because it has been repeatedly reproduced and visited by those who had agreed—or brought to an agreement—that this little sculpture represents a city. Thus, symbols, in being repeatedly represented, attract attention and eventually become icons. But the *Inkaprinsessa* was not an icon (yet). Its location in the city, its position in the square, relegated to the perimeter, its size, its background, its podium, did not allow for stunning pictures. As soon as one stepped back from it, and considered its context, the sculpture blended in with its environment and somehow disappeared.

In any case, the sculpture was hypnotic to me. I spent a lot of time at the square looking at it and taking photographs of it. There were so many angles to be photographed, and while I did so, while I analysed and understood the relationship between the geometry of the statue and the geometry of the square, the angle of tension, and its dynamic relationship, I immersed myself in the square's life. Contrarily, for all the people that used the square—those who went to the convenience store, the children playing around me, those who crossed the area, cycling and walking at different paces—the sculpture went unnoticed. The statue fell in the category of urban furniture; it was like a bin, or a bench, or a lamppost, or even less important, for it was not even functional, it could not be used. Passers-by did not seem to be aware of
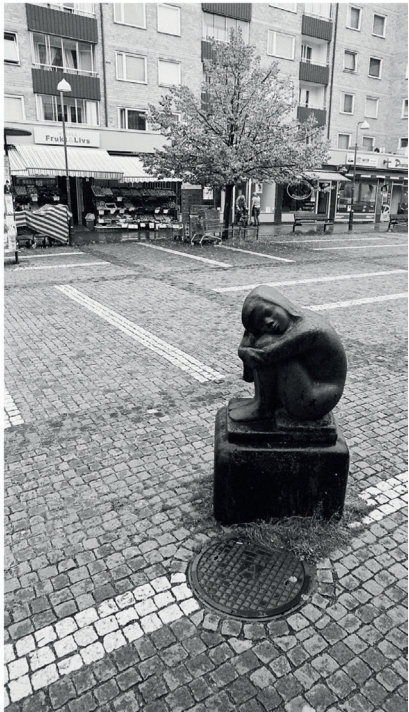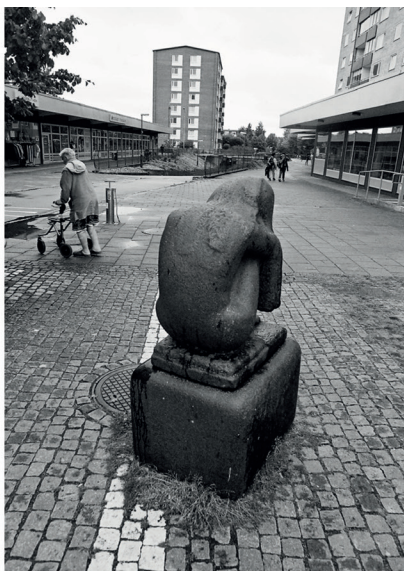
it; except when I was photographing it, as if I was the one who pointed at it, so that they could notice it.

When I was around the statue, with my camera, and especially with my reflex camera, people stared at me, and then at the statue, asking why that person was doing photographs of it. Hence, did the action of photographing their 'ordinary public art piece' make them aware of it? Did it become more relevant to them, an 'ordinary icon' as I already suggested? Could the action of pointing out be the means of beginning to shape an icon, a symbol for them?

To understand the importance of my action, I began to include more things in the photographs and I expanded my frame. Little by little, my attention shifted towards the people in the square, realising the tension I felt was not generated by the sculpture on its own, but by the situation between the people passing by, me, the static girl, and the place. Users of the square were used to it; it was part of their ordinary life, an object on their way home. However, I, with my camera, taking pictures of the object produced tension. So, I began to include people in the pictures too, to grasp that relationship.

The *Inkaprinsessa*—in her 'symbolic' relationship with me—managed to step up and be noticed, even if temporarily. Those walking near me looked at it, and just then, for a little moment, the statue was given a glimpse of recognition. The necessary interaction between my framing of the statue and its surroundings was crucial for the statue to be noticed. By framing more than just my object of study, by including the space around it, and the people interacting with it, I proposed, even if for a short period of time, an ordinary icon for the ordinary life of the square. The statue managed to be brought to the fore.

Inventive representations

During the week I spent in Malmö water was present in many different ways. It rained a lot, and most of the places I was driven to had to do with something related to water. Water was also present in my visit to the Ribersborgs Kallbadhus—a public sauna at the seashore from where I could see the Øresundsbron. In looking carefully at the representation of the bridge in the painting of the wall, I realised the

image I recognised as the Øresundsbron was not a faithful copy of it; there was no fidelity between reality and representation. The real bridge only had to two large pylons that were higher than the platform, whereas in the painting on the wall, the bridge had more than two high pylons. However, the resemblance was great, and my confusion justified: a very long bridge with pillars supporting a platform and high columns with cables supporting what seemed to be a bigger gap in the base for larger sea craft to go through. Then, was the bridge in the painting the Øresundsbron? And, if so, did the author or authors copy the real bridge, or a photograph of it, or, alternatively, did they create an illusion of it, an image that presented their own interpretation of reality? In any case, does such way of representing—i.e. inventing, imagining—tell us something about the intention behind the painting itself? Is indeed fidelity an issue here?

Apart from the bridge, in the painting we can see a sea with big waves, and several seagulls and ducks.; and it also shows two boats. In the fore there is a sail boat; in the back, just attempting to go through the gap of the bridge we can spot a bigger ship. On the right-hand side, in the background the horizon with a coast is depicted, and the skyline of what seems to be either the chimneys of an industrial area or a couple of churches. Most of the picture's features are composed in order to recreate an image that, even if it is not 'real', could be real.

Drawing and painting, as a matter of fact, are visual methods that allow defining and deciding detail. Painters—necessary mediators here—always begin with a white canvas. The invention or transgression of reality helps them recreate a scene, the essence of what is meant to be told, rather than reproducing reality. Berger (2013) underlines composition in relation to painting against time, which is what photography is mostly about. I see invention as a necessary adaptation. The fidelity of the bridge in itself is possibly the least important aspect of the painting; thus, having some more cables or pylons does not change its meaning, especially if the actual bridge is not to be compared against—for the painting is somewhere else. The importance for me is the combination of different elements, that is, the composition among seagulls, ducks, the sea, the sky, the horizon, the vessels and the bridge, in spite of how real they are.
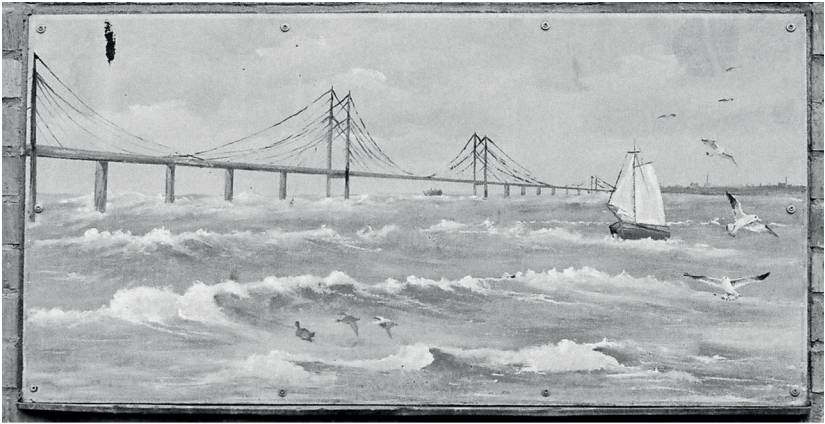
Birds, puddles and rust

In the middle of the square was a fountain with water running through it. It was situated in the centre of the pavement pattern made of coloured cobblestones—white, red and black. Its name was *Vattentrappa* (Water staircase) and was built by Birre Skoglund in 1991. No sign said anything about it, similar to the *Inkaprincessa*. The fountain was more visible than the statue and audible too; the water running through filled the square with its sounds. It is important here to point out that the square was for pedestrians and bicycles only. No hint of cars, horns, or any other noise related to transit was heard. Being in the centre of the square gave the fountain a preeminent presence. Children played with it, got close to it, and climbed it too; the corners of the fountain were free of water and they could jump up to its top.

On the edges of the fountain, as in many other corners of elements in the square, small patches of weeds grew between the cracks of the cobble stones. The weeds exposed the humid spots; areas in the shadow, places close to water springs or drains, and even, specific areas on the pavement where water was temporarily stored after raining due to micro depressions produced by the settling of the ground. In the northern and shadiest area, under the biggest tree of the square, I found a mushroom. White and solitary, I was shocked to see such a 'wild' plant in such an urban location. The humid area and the low activity in that specific spot of the square allowed the mushroom to grow. No one used that spot; it was dark.

The patches of water reproduced after every episode of rain; the square was filled with little puddles that lasted for some hours. Some were even the sites of disputes between seagulls, crows and pigeons. On their edges the newest weeds grew. One of those fights for the territory was noticed by a little girl, the only one that was still attentive to 'extra-ordinary' situations. Excited as she was, she ran toward the birds and scared them away. The birds flew to the roofs nearby. They stayed on top of the porch, the supermarket, and also on top of lampposts. They kept on fighting—pigeons and seagulls; ordinary fights that manage to hold them ordinarily together. After taking a photograph of one seagull on top of a lamppost, a woman looked at

me asking with signs what was so interesting; her partner on the bench pointed at the seagull, and she laughed. Those micro-relationships with the field—even quick exchanges of looks—confirmed my role in the square not just as someone who extracted knowledge but also as a facilitator and provider of information.

On the top of the tallest building in the neighbourhood—a thirteen storey landmark that, according to the architects (Tykesson and Malmö kulturmiljö 2002), would help inhabitants navigate the core of the neighbourhood—a group of seagulls flew in circles making eights shapes in the sky. They flew over the square and back to the top, as if they were controlling their territory. The tall building was their view point and the square their territory.

A closer look at the seagulls in the paintings revealed their details and the passing of time. Besides the painted seagulls, stains, scratches, and rust emerged from the decolourised metal slab that was the base for the painting. On the edges, ten screws and washers were attached the slab to the wall. Around them, rust was revealed. Looking even closer, one could see mosquitos trapped in near-invisible spider webs that seemed to be almost as big as the painted seagulls. Time had passed and was revealed in these scratches, decolouration, and decay.

Signs and numbers

My visit to the Hyllie tower, a UFO-shaped water storage infrastructure, was conditioned by the rain. The tower stood near a parking for coaches numbered from 1 to 11, near the train station closest to Denmark, a big shopping mall, and a convention centre where a video-game congress was happening. There was a queue of traffic to get into the covered parking. Outside, the few people that were around ran to avoid the rain. The base of the tower was full of vegetation. Thus, taking close-up pictures was challenging.

The most striking aspect of that visit, apart from the stunning abstract shape of the tower's construction, was its background: an area full of construction cranes. The area was under huge development pressure. In comparison, the painting showed an empty field, as if the tower was standing on the edge of town. In the background, though, it
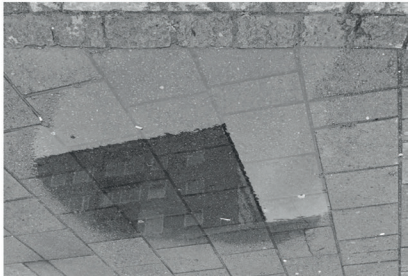
had an interesting feature depicted: a billboard. In one of the buildings on the edge of town it could be read: MKB Holma. In Nydala square, in the tallest building there was also a similar sign: MKB Nydalatorget. It did not take me long to realise MKB was the municipal public housing company that owned hundreds of buildings and thousands of flats in the city.

Signs and numbers are ubiquitous. They give us instructions, clues for navigation, specific information of places, and the like. Perec, indeed, begins his attempt at exhausting the Parisian place with an inventory of letters, conventional symbols and numbers to which he finds an explanation to them. '"P" which stands for "parking", [..] 86 (on the front of a bus on the line 86, [..] 6 (on the square, indicating that we are in the sixth *arrondisement* in Paris' (Perec 2010: 5), and so on. Benjamin (2009) even titles his essay with the name of a sign of the street and the fragments with the names of signs encountered on it too. Signs and numbers populate our streets, and we very often skip them from our account of the city.

In Nydala, apart from the big billboard on top of the building and the letters composing the names of the shops, I found one type of numbering that later I saw replicated all over the city. The number I observed with more attention was located in a lamppost in the square. I discovered it while taking pictures of the lamppost itself, realising the uneven and rusted paint that covered it. The plate seemed to have been changed and replaced several times. There were some older marks and some areas without paint. The colour of the sign, originally red, was faded, like the ones with the paintings. Framed against the red coloured concrete slabs of the buildings, it was clear that they lost their original colour. The lamppost too, revealed its long life. Layer over layer of paint, some stains still remain.

The plate had two numbers written in each of its faces: 3174 and 10,5; each giving what I supposed was information. Close to that sign there were two other smaller sings with several numbers on them and three letters: VAV, that I managed to learn they referred to *Vatten-och AvloppsverksfOreningen* (Water and Sewage Association). That is, these signs and numbers related to water infrastructures.

The city codifies and makes visible its infrastructures with signs that allow explaining and connecting the dots. But only few people can understand these messages, in a language that includes or excludes citizens by expertise. Invisible networks emerge to the surface in the shape of numbers and signs.

Café Nydala

The Café Nydala was my shelter during the rainy days. I sat either inside or outside, looking at people in the square. Three things could be highlighted from those pauses, three objects that indicated to a certain extent the type of clientele that populated the café: walking frames, cigarettes, and plastic flowers.

For customers with walkers the café was within reach; they could walk from home to the café, after their shopping in the supermarket and then back home. There, they met their friends, colleagues, or neighbours. It was a social spot. Walkers gave their users the ability to move and access places a little bit farther than their doorstep, affording users self-autonomy and independence. They could move, and also rest. Walkers were equipped with a small seat and a basket to carry groceries. Their presence in the square was apparent. I could count at least three in one morning. They made visible an aging society, yet an autonomous one too.

In front of Nydala's Café, there was a small podium of about two meters wide along the building, with a ramp and a stainless-steel railing on its edge. The little podium was covered by a porch and the tables could only be configured in a line, close to the windows of the café. Outside the café people talked and smoked. Some customers smoked their cigarettes outside, some others had their coffee inside, others did both. They got in and out. Inside there was not much talking; they had more space and each customer sat at their own table. Outside tables were smaller and fewer, so they were shared. On the sides of the tables, stackable plastic chairs with cushions on the seat were placed facing the square. Some chairs were even stacked in pairs; I imagine that was done to have the seat a little bit higher. In the middle of the tables, big ashtrays made with inverted ceramics pots occupied most of the table.

When I sat inside Café Nydala, I took photographs of the outside. At the entrance there were coats, newspapers, and magazines. Customers used them to play Sudoku and pass their time while smoking outside or drinking inside. By the windows there were lots of flowers in small pots, some of them hanging and also over the edge of the window. I drew the indoor scene, including the flowers. The owner, watching me drawing them, approached me and asked me if I liked them. I responded affirmatively, and she replied—as if she had to excuse herself— 'they are plastic flowers because people are allergic'.

Faded event

Finally, my last visit was to the *Pilldammsparken*. When I visited it, I used my analogic reflex photo camera. The idea behind using such an old-fashioned visual method was to compare the ways in which one relates to the field depending on the device used, and also, considering how the field would respond to such devices. Using my old Minolta camera from the 1970s introduced an unexpected relationship with the photo; I could not check the images whilst in situ. I had to wait until the film was developed. And the result of this process was surprising for me. Like in the paintings, the image of the photograph was faded. I forgot to change the sensitivity of the camera and I overexposed the photo. The result was related to materiality and time. The over-exposure was material, for it burned the film, like the sun burnt the metal slab of the painting; and it was temporal too, it was exposed for a longer time than expected.

The park was for me an ordinary park. Nothing indicated any clues as to its importance, until I discovered a short film that explained it was created for the Baltic Exhibition 1914 (Svenska Filminstitutet 1914). The exhibition was of great significance for Malmö. It was a celebration, among other things, of Malmö's achievement of the category of European Metropolitan city, crossing the threshold of 100,000 inhabitants. The Baltic Exhibition is regarded to be one of the greatest events in Malmö history. Nevertheless, currently, the park does not show any of that glow. The park today is integrated with the city and it is used as an 'ordinary' park. The glow has faded away, like the paint burnt by the sun.

In the painting of the park, stains show that the painting was used for other activities. A mark left by a basketball hitting the painting emerges at the base of the tower. Possibly, kids playing in the park have used the frame to practice their aim. Similarly, in hitting the shutter of my camera I have also practiced mine too.

The empty frame

Representing a city with a photo-essay is an impossible task. Here, in attempting to visually exhaust a place in Malmö I have proposed an entangled way of doing it, with the intention of presenting a very partial portion of it. Exhausting a place, in that sense, was never envisioned as an exercise to cover it all. However, in this attempt, I have shown some facets of what one Scandinavian city looks like, combining the iconic and the ordinary. There are seagulls, and lots of water and rain. There are people with walking frames, and people who cycle. There are people smoking outside and people who go to buy their groceries from the closest convenience store, but also people who take their car to buy specific fish from a specific fish market. There are icons in the city that might connect with its identity, and also ordinary elements that could be revealed and enhanced by situated research practices. There are plastic flowers for those with allergies and fungus that grow in the shade. There are surprising depictions of places that allow for traveling without even moving from the place. And still, little kids who are surprised by the ordinary fights of birds.

Intentionally, by presenting the four paintings on the wall in the beginning of this essay, I excluded one object that was beyond the frame of the photograph that showed all four on the wall, which I reserved for the conclusion: an empty frame. I thought the blank canvas could be inspiring for a closure, for it revealed the original nature of the four paintings. The edge of the empty frame showed signs of having been a former window; in the lower part there was a rain gutter and the bricks that covered the area of the frame were a little bit different than the ones on the wall; the rows did not align. At the end of the rain gutter, there was also a clear division between both bricks. In addition, there were also signs that a metal plate was attached and used for a
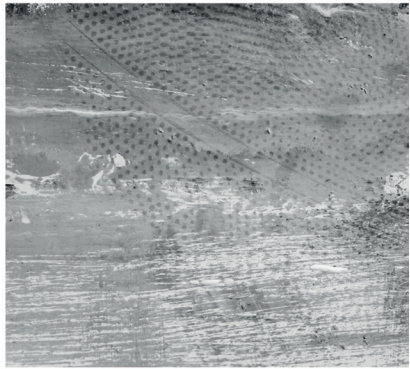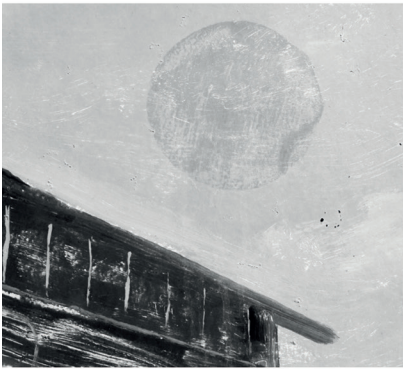
painting, like the other four discussed earlier. But the metal plate and the painting had disappeared. There were holes in the brick near the perimeter, ten to be exact, filled with silicone.

Like Perec's attempt, mine was framed by a specific timeframe—one week—and was conditioned by the situations I encountered that time in the places I happened to be. Also, like Perec, my essay has been constrained by the epistemological approach I chose to use in the first place to relate to the field: the aim of this photo-essay was attempting at *visually* exhaust a place in Malmö. In trying to visually account for the place, I was confronted with my own positioning within the field. I have not been a neutral observer, and never pretended to be. I have taken an active role in the development of this essay; I have been a relational entity that was shaped by it and have shaped it. I have framed and decided paths to follow suggested by the material and events I have found in my wanderings. And, in doing so, I have given a partial account shaped by my own positionality in the space I was researching. Paradoxically, instead of exhausting the place itself, I have exhausted myself.

Now that we have visited the place, and the sites beyond, we have a better understanding of the area and could think of some representations that might probably fill the empty blank frame; each of us could think of one or many. However, the intention behind this essay was not to decide what should represent the Scandinavian city; namely, I am not trying to engage the reader in such an impossible task. Rather, I believe that the act of leaving the empty frame blank is much more productive, because the empty wall is in fact a window that might trigger the imagination of those who walk by and image what their city would look like.

Acknowledgements

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