

Hans Irrek  
Images from the shadowy kingdom of modernity

Photography is truth. And cinema  
is truth twenty-four times a second.

—Jean Luc Godard

Mikael Olsson's photographs, for one moment, celebrate the state of transience. It is most of all the loneliness, the fundamental loneliness, that we sense when we contemplate the photographs. This loneliness constitutes the foundation of a series of remarkable photographs in which Mikael Olsson confronts us with the moody presence of abandoned houses. Although Olsson's chosen subjects are located in various Swedish counties, they nonetheless build a coherent body of work, an aesthetically unified plan. Behind it stands the architectonic handwriting of Bruno Mathsson, as a bonding element that has inscribed on the buildings, over their obvious decay, that visual attractiveness to which Olsson was magnetically drawn.

One notices in Olsson's photography the closeness to a theme. One might almost describe his images as photographic diaries that work with the morbid charm and the decay of the buildings, in real time. Although the images have a seductive sharpness, created with masterly precision, they lack the quality of documentary coolness. Olsson replaces this with a very intimate treatment of his subject matter. One can almost speak of a collection of images, an arrangement of an architectonic legacy, a preservation of impressions. Out of the fascinated activity emerges a series of images, casual, erratic, but also arranged or calculating, which shows these abandoned buildings from dozens of different angles and perspectives.

Alternatively, the basis of the photographic work, the individual picture, also allows itself to be taken over, to be expanded around the dimension of time, in a cinematographic format. In 2006, Mikael created the film *Kosta 3:30* in cooperation with Andreas Roth. The film is a visual

documentation of the row-houses Mathsson designed for master craftsmen and foremen at the Swedish Kosta glassworks. There is no doubt about it; the filmic essay is presented with unusual conceptual crispness, which makes it easy for the viewer to concentrate on important sections of the filming. Through the camera lens, our glance is guided, in meditative sequences of stills that constantly release new ways of seeing.

*Kosta 3:30*  
35 mm colour film, 19.46 min  
sound by Carsten Nicolai  
© Mikael Olsson/Andreas Roth, 2006



Serpentine Gallery Pavillion, 2007  
Olafur Eliasson & Kjetil Thorsen/Snöhetta  
© Mikael Olsson, 2007



Under the artist's obsessive eye, the rooms are transformed into a stage whose only props are light, emptiness and shadows. The film sequences that follow one after another are, in a certain respect, characterized by a Buddhist clarity, which, in turn, is mirrored by the minimalist soundtrack. This way of seeing is not accidental. Olsson is, in this respect, a master of the objective-schematic depiction. An outstanding example of this is his photograph of the interior of the Serpentine Pavilion, designed by a team led by Olafur Eliasson and Kjetil Thorsen in 2007. Part of the interior reveals itself to the eye of the beholder, in a golden-red color scheme. A skillful use of light distribution brings the dimensions' interplay to the surface. Upon closer inspection, what at first appears as a graphic pattern transforms itself into an ingenious interior-architectonic configuration in a play between the second and third dimension. But in contrast to the coolly laid-out, contemporary archi-

texture of the Serpentine Pavilion, one traces in Kosta the breath of the past in each new frame. This is at the same time the great art of this conceptual film, which says everything about the flow of time, corruption and regeneration, in that it presents the very emptiness as a concentration of space and time.

Perceived in this manner, the photographs and the film as a unit create a visual encyclopedia of these buildings of Bruno Mathsson's, frozen in masterful images. At the same time, the stylistic unity, Olsson's photographic handwriting, repeatedly splits: here we see the stringent documentation of the modern, as it was inscribed by Mathsson on the bodies of the buildings; the private glance falls on details: furniture heaped together, arrangements of screws and keys. It is as if one feels the ever-present moisture through the surface of the photographs. Like acid on litmus paper, it has eaten its way into curtains and wooden panels, and little by little it has taken possession of Frösakull.

### Hunting ghosts

There is hardly a photograph that does not carry a trace of the surreal. It is almost as if one is not the only observer in these houses. It seems that Olsson, in order to achieve this special mood in his photographs, with his chosen angle of approach, appeals to the innermost law of photography. Hans Finsler, the great pioneer of Swiss photography, once said:

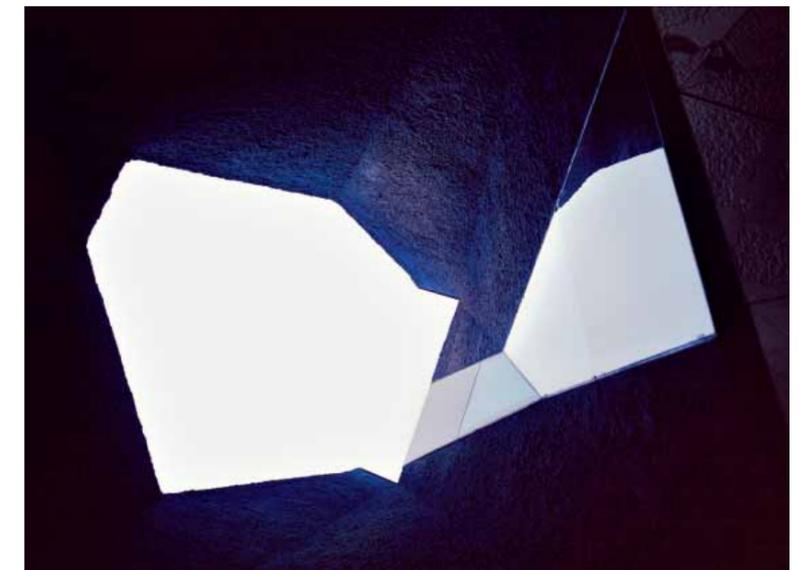
The surrealist painters have, with their use of the open perspective, showed photography space. They knew that a mystical reality can arise when the picture's perspective differs from that of the eye, and they have perfected this secret by telling it.

From this point of view, the visual excursion into the rooms becomes a tentative experiment, Olsson's own narration. The artist, who, in spite of his young age, has a diverse and far from one-dimensional body of work to his credit, preserves in the nucleus of his work a stylistic

purism. His transparent and crystal-clear vision brings forth images in which the architecture can withdraw and be entirely itself, with its own qualities. The consistent absence of people serves, here, as a conscious means of emphasizing the effect of the atmosphere of the place.

The photographer has forcefully demonstrated this very unique relation to the 'genius loci' in a photographic documentation of Herzog and de Meuron's building for the Barcelona Forum, as well. With a few, extremely limited views of the building he manages to depict the architecture as an 'atmospheric' and place-relating event. Furthermore, the desolation serves as a basis for the wonderful effect of these photographs. As if from another world, Mathsson's houses stand out against it: solitary boxes, already close to being engulfed by the landscape, filled with architectonic details, ideas and visions. Sea air, the changing seasons and the out-of-control vegetation have been hard at work on Bruno Mathsson's architecture over the years, and have left behind the kind of patina and condition that finally appealed to the photographer's eye.

Barcelona Forum  
Herzog & de Meuron  
© Mikael Olsson, 2007



In a positive, metaphorical sense, we might say that the photographer is hunting ghosts. Olsson's ghosts are the spirits of memory. Nothing documents this hunt for the past, this attempt to get as close as

possible to what once was, better than the interiors of Frösakull: the built-in cupboards, the niches and closets are strung out like modernity's architectonic test arrangements. But we find far more than merely modernity translated into architecture. We find a personal, self-willed house that has not yet entirely let go of the spirits of its possessors. At such moments, we encounter a mood in the photographs that is condensed to the extreme. Here one senses how photography surpasses the mere pictorial character, how it is in a position to call forth emotions, moods and states of mind that enable the viewers, for one moment, to immerse themselves in the past, to follow the trace left by the other's life. Furthermore, the trivial detail, the unspectacular scene, is exactly what expresses the beauty of the moment. For the poetry of such moments, the absence of people is not absolutely necessary. One might, for example, consider the obviously casual and very personal photographic sketches Mikael Olsson brought home from a journey to America: Among the most beautiful photographs in this visual journal is a full-frame, androgynous image of a dark-haired woman, taken from behind. It bears the simple title #06. It is an extremely balanced image, which is successful only because of the distribution of light and the dark nuances of the various parts of the body. What makes this image remarkable is the way in which the camera cuts off a brief moment from the continuous flow of time and transforms it into one single compelling image that preserves the entire beauty of that moment for all eternity.

#### Passion and memory

Hardly any other photographer has so forcefully documented the emotionally charged mood of abandoned buildings. Yet it seems to be an obsession of Olsson's to always grant us views into buildings and building interiors which seem hermetically sealed. The photographs present us with the vision of quick-frozen memories of a life that was still lived here some years ago, that existed – in two senses of the word: on the one hand, in Mathsson's architectonic language, in the built-in cupboards, the furniture designed by the architect, the cantilevered glass walls – that gave the occupants a cinematoscopic view of the surrounding flora. On the other hand, in the buildings' interiors are allusions to



#06  
© Mikael Olsson, 1995

people's gradual withdrawal. The arrangement of the things in houses gives evidence of those everyday activities that people usually engage in throughout their lives: eating, sleeping, showering, working, grabbing something off a shelf, the glance through the windows with which Mathsson has been so generous. Here again, Olsson's expert handling of the material stands out, in the interplay between perfectly chosen frames and the use of ambient light. He creates an atmosphere in which the memory of the private world of the Mathssons lies over Södrakull and Frösakull like a wafer-thin folio. This is the world of a couple who probably loved the severe clarity of the northern landscape and who found their inner selves in the contemplation of nature. But to a greater extent, the photographs carry in them that strange mood of which Picasso once spoke metaphorically: it's not a reality you can hold in your hand. It's more like a perfume – in front of you, behind you, to the sides. The scent is everywhere, but you don't quite know where it comes from.

#### Change and moods

The photographs clearly show that Mikael Olsson observed Mattson's houses over a long period of time. While Södrakull is seen from the perspective of a passer-by driven by curiosity, Olsson, in Frösakull, intervenes sensitively in the landscape. The rejuvenation he gives the house by opening the curtains, the meticulously arrangement of the furnishings, the wide-open doors that invite the eye to enter, are more than mere snapshots. They are, in two respects, self-sufficient as images: as caught by the photographer's eye and in the actual preparation of the room. Furthermore, Olsson works with the constantly changing arrangements and with the moods created by the shifting lighting. The visibility of nature is a contributing factor – where the observer's glance glides over the interior and rests on nature, for a fraction of a second, the unity of nature and life, of architecture and the demands of modernity, closes itself. Here, in his most powerful images, it seems that Mikael Olsson is determined to celebrate transience and decay.

In Frösakull, Olsson carefully opens the house to the observer – so to speak. His impressions of Södrakull, on the other hand, he leaves

up to chance. It is, as already indicated, the play of a curious observer, “en passant”. Everything is constructed on the basis of the casual, secret glance. The whole picture remains closed to us, the casual, uninvited glance through curtains and windows allows only a fuzzy and fragmented perception of the interior. Its likeness is never given as such. The photographs is hardly ever a precise reproduction of the place. With the exception of a few shots that bear witness to a careful approach to the building, the intimate looks into the house are characterized by diffusion, reflection and blur. Light breaking through from the outside plays a role in all these sensitive, graphically structured images. Even more important are the reflections in which unbridled nature is mirrored, like the Eiffel Tower in a high-rise’s window pane in Jacques Tati’s cinematographic masterwork *Playtime*.

Beyond every reminiscence of Bruno Mathsson’s legendary design, Mikael Olsson remains the extremely talented visual chronicler of these houses. Once again it is art that salvages memory. Art brings memory out of the oblivion of modernity and back into our consciousness, and through Mikael Olsson’s photographs it remains present. In this manner, the architectonic legacy of Bruno Mathsson serves as a catalyst for another work, which commemorates Mathsson and his time, but in addition and more importantly, stands out as an artistically self-sufficient body of work.

© Mikael Olsson