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Published: Photobooks in Sweden

Niclas Östlind

Koenig Books



Mikael Olsson in his home, Stockholm, 2018.



NICLAS ÖSTLIND: What was the first photobook you ever bought?

MIKAEL OLSSON: One of the first was Josef Koudelka's *Exiles* with an essay by Czeslaw Milosz, which I still find very interesting. Back then, the bookshops in Gothenburg had very few photobooks to choose from and I remember it was rather expensive. Then I bought the photobook version of Mao's *Little Red Book*.

NÖ: What version was that?

MO: Quite simply, one of many versions in print of Mao's *Little Red Book*. When I purchased it in Beijing 1991, it was a forbidden book; you bought it under the counter in the markets.

NÖ: Can you tell me how you got involved in photography?

MO: After school and military service, I worked one year and had no idea what I wanted to be. Even though I hadn't done a lot of photography, I was very keen on it and tried to teach myself how to take better photographs on a trip to Asia 1991–92. I saw myself becoming a National Geographic photographer, but realised quite soon how that was mostly about maintaining a certain style. When I came back home, I wanted to work as a photographer's assistant. Since I didn't know any photographers, I looked in the Yellow Pages and rang those with big adverts. Photographer Mats Bengtsson offered me a position. He was very supportive and then the next step was to apply to the Department of Photography and Film at University of Gothenburg.

NÖ: Where did your interest in photobooks come from? I also see a phone book in your photobook collection; one of several books I'd like you to talk about.

MO: There was a very good library at the School of Photography, where I studied 1993–96. It was established by the school's first principal and professor, Rune Hassner, and the teachers Sven Westerlund, Tuija Lindström, Åsa Franck and Per L-B Nilsson. Guest lecturers visited from abroad – Lewis Baltz, Nan Goldin, Bruce Davidson and many others – they spoke about their books and that was how you learned about the photographers. I recall Davidson showing us his own prints and going through every single page of his books, unaware that we already had access to them. Visiting photographers were astonished by the library because it had the original editions of so many influential photographers. That's when

I started buying books, aiming to create my own reference library. My friend Thomas Revenvall worked at a printers where they made the phone books. In the early 90s, they began putting artwork on the covers, and it had become an interesting assignment in the art world since Dan Wolgers had simply put his own phone number on the cover. That phone book, from 1992, became quite famous and is in the collections of MoMA in New York.

The previous year, the covers had gone to various furniture designers and after that it was the photographers' turn. This time people started talking about the phone books even before they came out, because some covers presented a feminist angle which was considered controversial. The board at Telia (Swedish Telecom), which issued the phone books, grew weary of the debate and put its foot down. "Scrap them all and run some landscapes from a photo agency instead." That's when my friend called me. "We're switching to new covers. The old ones will be thrown away, do you want some?" I hesitated a little and he said, "There's no time to think, we're throwing them out today!" So I got one complete phone book with a cover by Lars Tunbjörk, and some unbound covers with pictures by Gerry Johansson, Ingalill Rydberg's portrait of Christer Strömholm, the one where he's talking on the phone, and Annica Karlsson Rixon's picture with photographer Annika von Hauswolff as the model!

Because the phone books never came out, Tunbjörk had never seen it, and on one occasion when we met he signed his phone book. Most probably, it is the only copy in existence.

NÖ: It's fascinating that phone book covers were a forum for contemporary art; today they are part of media archaeology. Can you choose another book that is unique in some way?

MO: I was on the editorial board of art journal Paletten and in conjunction with an issue about Japanese contemporary art we visited Tokyo in 2000. When I went to the photography section of bookshops, I would look for any Swedish books and I found JH Engström's *Trying to Dance*. It was quite a shabby copy, so no one had bought it. When I flicked through I discovered that all the pictures showing genitals had been censored. Someone had used Tipp-Ex to cover them up. On the front was a little sticker in Japanese, "This photobook contains retouched parts."

NÖ: Strange it should be censored considering how Japanese photography is full of genitals.

MO: The imagination is very important in Japan; they're allowed to show pubic hair but not genitals. You could get arrested. Here's another book I'd like to show you, even though it's a collection of poems: *Fotografier av undergångens leende* (Photographs of the Smile of Destruction). It's ac-

tually poet Bruno K. Öijer's debut book, but wasn't released by the publisher until 1974. His other collection *Sång för Anarkismen* (Song for Anarchism) was written later, but came out in stencilled form in 1973 and therefore *Fotografier av undergångens leende* is number two in his production. Confusing!

nö: It is surprising to find a book of that nature in a collection of photobooks.

mo: I'm not just interested in pictures; I'll choose books for the way they articulate or define new ideas. For me, it's important that books expand the mind. There are incredibly many photobooks made about traditional themes and sentimental portrayals. I look for photobooks that represent something else.

nö: Could one say that you are more interested in the book as an object than the photographs?

mo: There doesn't have to be a contradiction; it's even better if it works in harmony and creates something unique. I don't consider myself a collector, but simply a curious person. I am interested in things I don't understand or don't already know about.

nö: It's a collection with many different directions. How would you describe your own books and what did you want to achieve?

mo: As a photographer and artist, I am interested in perception and representation. My book *Södrakull Frösakull* is a reflection on Sweden as seen through the two private houses of architect and furniture designer Bruno Mathsson. They act as the background to an examination of the photographic space. I started with the idea of taking a completely unsentimental approach, with which I dissect and analyse these places.

I had access to one house, Frösakull, and I could experiment and rearrange the various spaces. I had no keys for the other house, Södrakull, and had to take photographs – surreptitiously, you could say – through gaps in the curtains. I hadn't thought about it in the beginning, but the limited circumstances and resistance created a method to investigate new ideas around photography, pictures and spaces, as well as voyeurism. I try to achieve a new picture, besides the subject itself.

nö: Had you already decided to make a book with your work?

mo: It was an early goal to compile the material into book form. A photobook is a unique combination of content and poetry, combined in an intimate way that enables distribution and can be shown in a broader context. For



Telephone catalogue, Växö, 1994, cover by Lars Tunbjörk.



Covers for telephone catalogues. In Mikael Olsson's hands a cover by Karlsson Rixon.

me, the book is associated with photography's history; in most cases, when you think about a photographer, it's his or her books you're relating to.

NÖ: What were your thoughts on the book's design?

MO: I wanted to make a book with content and design that I could return to in the future and still find interesting. A hallmark of the design had to be its simplicity and the aim was to make the book an independent work and object. To a great extent, it involved minimising annoying factors, like pictures going across a gutter or bleeding off the page. Where the book or medium has authority over the picture. When it came to details about the dust jacket, cover, binding, etc, I let a more conceptual idea act in dialogue with the rest of the content. For example, by peeling back the dust jacket and peeking at the photograph printed on the other side, a reader turns into a voyeur. The hardcover shows part of a picture that, from a distance, looks like a slab of exclusive marble, but actually it's a detail of a curtain ruined by damp. I strive for embodiment and there is a specific material feeling to all sections: the dust jacket has a wax-like character, pictures and text are distinguished by different sorts of paper. It all gives each section its own quality. I collaborated with designers Daniel Carlsten and Jonas Jansson, and we had a dialogue with the publisher and printer Gerhard Steidl, who helped us with the choice of materials.

When I was putting the book together, I followed the concept more closely than the chronology. The first pictures are taken looking through curtains and the gaps look like incisions in the picture's surface. You look in, the gaze is one of examination, a manner that's almost forensic or investigative. That's how it starts – with a clear appropriation of perception – and then you browse through the book and into various spatialities, articulations and attitudes. Depending how carefully you read, and maybe not everyone discovers this, but it is the same living room that I reorganise, dissect and make 25 versions of. If you don't look at the plans shown further inside the book you might get the impression there are endless rooms, but it is actually only six in a small area of 150 m² including the yard.

I also studied Bruno Mathsson's own pictures of the furniture he designed. Some of my pictures are photographed in a similar way to how he did it in the 1960s, but the big difference from the pictures in the product catalogue is the setting and the furniture shows signs of age and use. I worked on this project for six years; as long as I had the keys to the house.

NÖ: When you say the pictures of the houses are a way to examine photography, what do you mean?

MO: That's something I do in all my work: to consider and use the subject as a material and conceptual point of departure. It's a three-dimensional world



STILL
J. Engström, *Trying to Dance*, Journal, 2003. Genitals censored by the Japanese bookseller.

that photography makes two dimensional. When I analyse the subject, the situation and its history, there are always circumstances and resistance that I use to formulate an idea. Basically, I try to be objective and avoid mannerism, but I understood that a house and a place of this type implies a manifestation of nostalgia. Navigating that without falling into a sentimental attitude was a challenge; to not fall into a sentimental attitude. Furthermore, the photographic technique and material can easily become a layer that reinforces the patina.

NÖ: One of the pictures, however, has traces of light seeping on to the film.

MO: That's the only picture with a presence of some sort of material sentimentality. By accident, I'd managed to drag the film out of the cassette slightly while it was in my bag, exposing it, but fortunately only extremely little. When I went to retake the picture, all the trees behind the house had been cut down and the view was completely different. So I thought I'd keep the picture and this connection with the photographic material makes it different from the rest.

NÖ: The project isn't primarily about the house; the cover shows a large bush that obscures the building, while at the same time architecture is an area you're often associated with as a photographer.

MO: When I do my own work it's not about exalting the subject or about beauty. Instead, it's about creating an independent space where concepts, quite separate from the subject, come into focus: identity, for example.

NÖ: In this context, how do you explore identity?

MO: For me, it's largely about a place and an object that changes, both in itself and through my pictures. About how I transform the subject by taking photographs with a certain lens, angle of view, the light and a certain film, subtractions, additions and dissecting. A process that's reinforced through the editorial work with the book.

NÖ: An interesting aspect to your projects, besides stretching over long periods of time, is that you choose to do most things yourself; especially considering how common it is to collaborate while working on photobooks.

MO: If you collaborate, then you always have to take someone else's ideas into consideration, but I want as few deviations as possible from my ideas. I want to keep my vision. On the other hand, I do collaborate with a designer to ask questions and compile the final document. It's different if you're making a catalogue for an institution; that context has many frameworks.

NÖ: What kind of limitations are you thinking about?

MO: An institution might have a public incentive to communicate in a certain way, about its own identity, and wants visitors to be able to afford its publications. So, for example, they can't make books that are too expensive. I do not have a public mandate when I make my books, instead I am fully focused on defining an idea.

NÖ: What would you say is the most rewarding thing about making photobooks, and what drives you?

MO: My book *on | auf* can be described as a conceptual world that I want to define and explore, and together with Péter Nádas' essay something else is created. He is an excellent writer with a background as a photographer and has an "inside perspective".

NÖ: What do you think his contribution adds to the book and your work?

MO: His essay is a beautiful intertwining between Poetry, Art History and Philosophy all in one, and it is different from the text in *Södrakull Frösakull*, which largely deals with the subject. There were so many important and interesting aspects to highlight about the era, the house and the architect; for example that the kitchen was on wheels and that Bruno Mathsson slept outdoors and connections to nudism, naturism and other phenomena separate from the actual photography. But the new book *on | auf* handles this differently. The places are named only in the titles of the photographs at the end of the book, but Péter Nádas has used my work to talk about photography and pictures in a broader perspective. The essay title gives a good idea of what it's about: "Loaned Landscape, Borrowed Objects. The Real Space of the Image and the Representation of Space in Mikael Olsson's Photography."

NÖ: What is the actual object this project is based around?

MO: It's a pavilion ordered by the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park, London 2012. It was sold and moved from the public space to a private one, and through the new context has taken on another identity. The pavilion was a collaboration between architects Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron and artist Ai Weiwei. I utilised the object and the places, but also their archive and communications, and have interpreted the material photographically in various ways. Since Ai Weiwei hadn't produced any physical objects that could be photographed, I had to find another way to materialise my ideas. I visited him in Beijing 2013, when he was under house arrest, and had access to his recorded Skype conversations with Herzog

& de Meuron. He had filmed them. I played them back on his own computer and photographed certain sequences. At the same time, you see on the monitor dust and marks, for example Ai Weiwei's fingerprints. It is a meeting between the physical and the imaginary, depicted with an analogue process, and is part of that conceptual world I'm seeking, where photography and pictures appear in different forms through the same object.

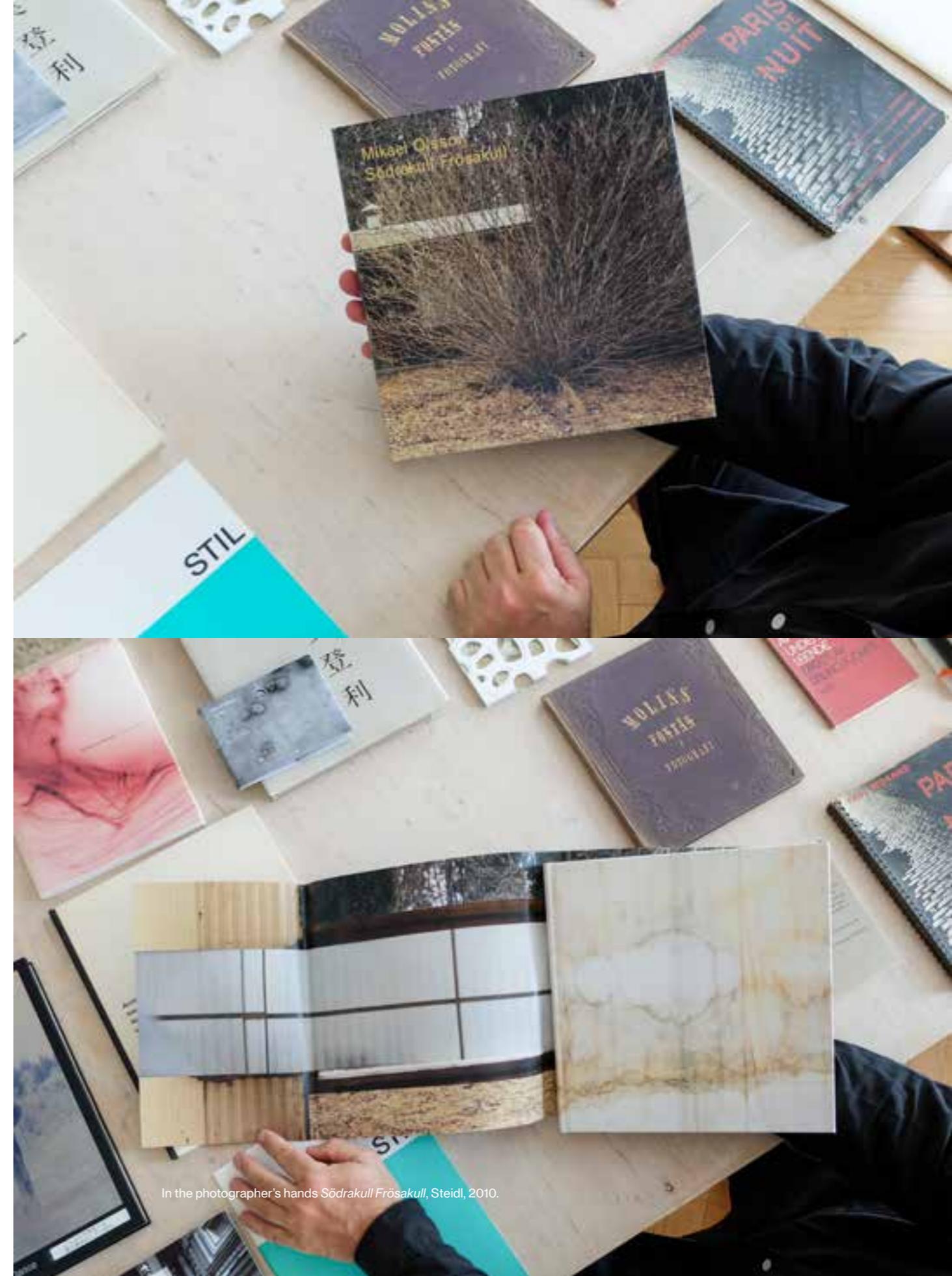
nö: Why did you choose this specific pavilion?

mo: In 2007, I came into contact with a person who owned a number of these pavilions shown by the Serpentine Gallery. They were dismantled and placed in storage in Britain. For me, it was incredibly exciting to imagine how these structures, which I'd formed an opinion on via my own experiences and media images, now have another physical shape and spatiality. The question is, what does this transformation mean to their identity?

In 2011, I read that Herzog & de Meuron and Ai Weiwei had decided to take an archaeological approach to their work and would start with the previous pavilions when creating a new design. Their plans had obvious connections with the ideas I had long found interesting and I thought, "I can use this to explore pictures and photography as a language." I can try – with my senses – to understand how perception can be articulated through photography. Furthermore, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron have a strong relationship with photography and art. Their collaborations include work with Rémy Zaugg, Dan Graham, Rosemarie Trockel and Thomas Ruff, as well as using pictures by Karl Blossfeldt as facade elements. For me, they represent something very attractive and I wanted to approach their work as an artist. That's how it was.

nö: You have invested a huge amount of resources in both of your books, not least time. In your opinion, what qualities make the book a good forum?

mo: When it comes to exposure and distribution, in my case, it matters greatly that the books are published by an established publishing house such as Steidl. Many people follow its publishing and the company has an incredible network. My latest book, its title *on | auf*, refers to the transformative power of photography, I have worked with a new project where the starting point was the film *Suspiria* from 2018 by the Italian film director Luca Guadagnino. It's a new interpretation of Dario Argento's version from 1977, which itself is inspired by a text by Thomas De Quincey. As I followed the filming – and the earlier film's locations and references – I worked photographically-conceptually with people and environments. I even played a part in the film. For me, it's about exploring contexts that I am curious about, yet even though the subject is different the issues are the same: ideas concerning perception, transformation and displacements.



In the photographer's hands *Söderkull Frösakull*, Steidl, 2010.

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