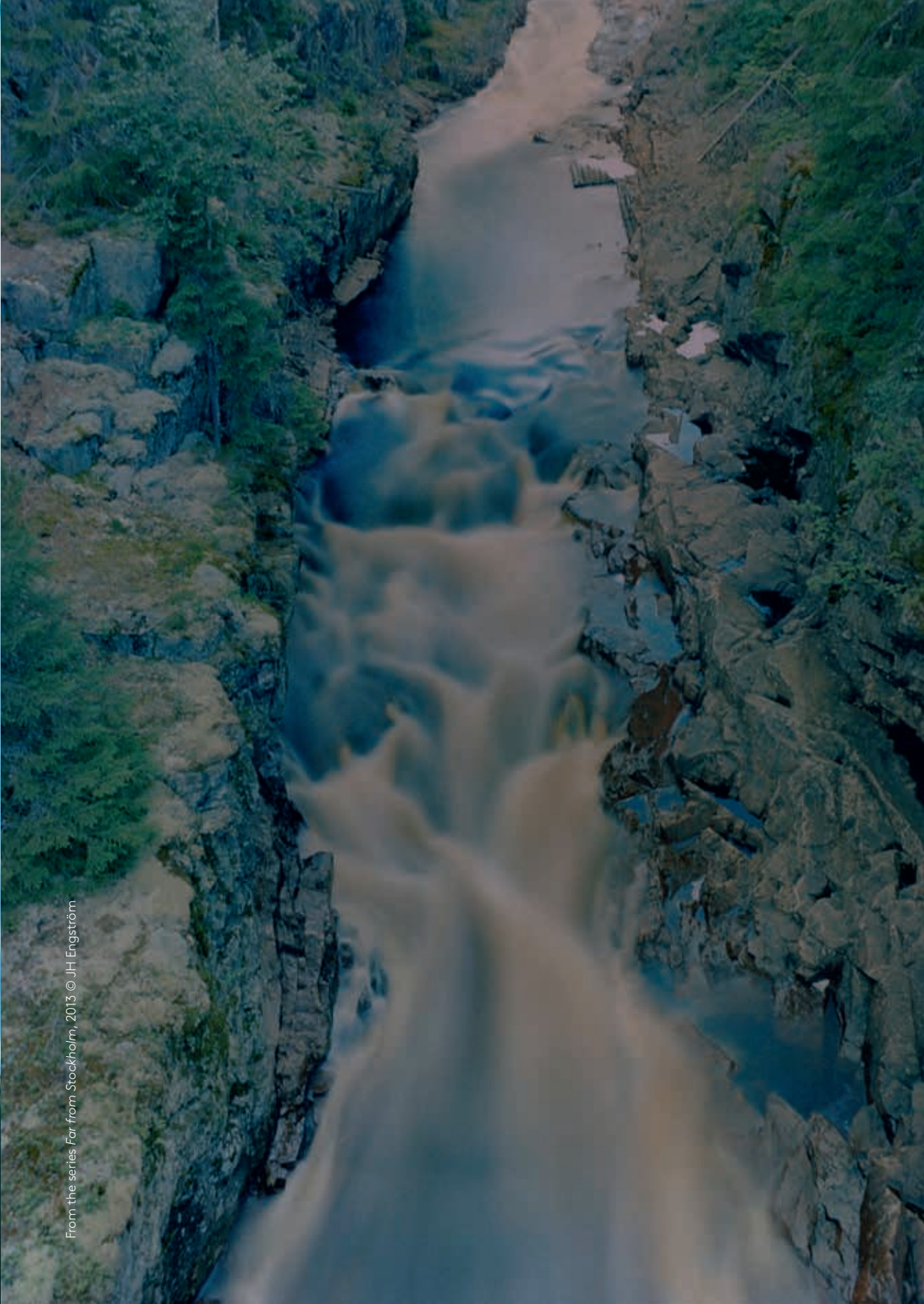


JH Engström

12.9 – 10.12.2014

Close Surrounding



Writing a text about the work of Swedish photographer JH Engström is a contradiction in terms. Using words to describe the meaning of his work is just as contradictory as a round square or dry water. Writing has been connected to reason from time immemorial. The Ancient Egyptians used symbols to create an administration based on their complex economic system. It became impossible to memorize everything and this led them to invent a trick: a system of writing. Every symbol had a meaning that we are still unable to decipher today. The written word was used to share information. Writing was originally a rational act. When viewing the work of JH Engström, reason is not the first thing that comes to mind. His work needs to be seen and felt - shivers down your spine, a lump in your throat and raw excitement in the lower part of your body. Language barely plays any role in this experience and is only a tool for referring to his work. If you wanted to compare the photographs of Engström with writing, you would wind up with the term used by the French surrealists, *écriture automatique*: improvisational, automatic writing without a predetermined goal and without taking into account the meaning of words and their context in a sentence. If you abandon your conscious, rational control, you will discover new, unexpected combinations that give the reader plenty of room for interpretation.

I was only introduced to the work of JH Engström relatively recently. His book *Trying to Dance* had already been sold out for a long time. (If you look for it on Ebay now, you will find a signed copy for 1850 dollars.) I was talking to the Dutch photographer Raimond Wouda. It was a friendly and relaxed conversation, but at one point the atmosphere suddenly changed at the mention of the name Engström. Wouda was surprised that I had never heard of him before. He didn't actually say it, but I could see it in his face. He passionately talked about a special book with the strange title of *CDG/JHE*.

Wouda brought the book with him to our next meeting. I understood his enthusiasm. The grey photographs of a desolate airport near Paris immediately connected with the

melancholy feeling that often overpowers you at an airport. The airport as a *transit zone* between one country and another, a place where people come and go without connecting with each other. A place of waiting, parting and uncertainty, as well as sorrow and nostalgia (and happiness and expectation, but that's not relevant right now). If you can resist the temptation to buy luxury products and are able to close yourself off from the bustle of the crowds, the waiting can be a meditative experience. That was the effect the photographs had on me. Besides this, I couldn't shake the idea that there had to be more to those photographs. They didn't just show an airport. The grey colour, which was the result of extreme overexposure, was too dominant for that. Engström infected the negative with light, which made the photographs look unreal. And wasn't the title, which included the initials of the photographer, too specific? Could the book be a mental self-portrait of the photographer? I spoke to various photographers about the intriguing book and realised that the enigmatic JH Engström was a closely guarded secret among photographers. It was as if they wanted to keep him for themselves - a 'photographer's photographer'.

JH Engström has been attracted to and repulsed by both the countryside and large cities for his entire life. He was born in Karlstad in Värmland, the sparsely populated province of a thousand lakes in western Sweden. The average number of inhabitants per square kilometre is now sixteen. Amsterdam has 4921 inhabitants per square kilometre. When Engström was ten years old, his parents decided to move to Paris, a metropolis with two million inhabitants. When he was thirteen years old, the family moved back to Sweden, but since then he has kept returning to Paris, the city he loves. He also lived for quite some time in New York, Brussels and Stockholm. He currently lives in Smedsby, a small hamlet in Värmland, although he often commutes to Paris. He needs both the city and the outskirts to be able to function as a photographer, as well as a human being. The manoeuvring between the peaceful, slow pace of country life and the stimulating energy of the city, with its many impulses, is essential in Engström's life.

This is not just reflected in his honest and authentic photos, but is also the theme of the *Close Surrounding* exhibition at Foam, in which the tension between the city centre and the outskirts can be felt.

In *Close Surrounding*, original, delicate collages of JH Engström's polaroids and small photos can be viewed. Each collage contains portraits of the same man. It is Engström attempting to compare himself to the environment in which he grew up. In the book *From Back Home*, Engström describes this process: "Maybe you can't really go back home/But this is where I am from/These images pay homage/to the people and landscapes that are my origins/I've returned to something my body and emotions recognize". *From Back Home* was created between 2001 and 2008, and shows people from the countryside embracing each other, drinking in a café or posing in the landscape. Some photographs are in colour, while others are in black and white. Engström was the first to combine colour with black and white and the use of extreme overexposure on a large scale. It is almost unbelievable that this was done for the first time only ten years ago. It is now an accepted practice within the field of photography and is also used by others.

From Back Home is a *stream-of-consciousness* monologue, a personal journey in which the creator tries to explore his memories. In order to emphasize the passage of time, Engström uses the same scene twice. The scene is photographed once and then photographed again a split second afterwards. In addition, the edges of the negatives are sometimes visible on the prints, or the photos are overexposed, faded or dusty. This is when the Houdini (the famous escape artist from Budapest) in Engström comes out. Engström miraculously escapes from the classic photographic convention of reproducing reality. He doesn't do this by abandoning reality and constructing his photos pixel by pixel in his studio, as many contemporary photographers and artists do these days. No, he plays with reality by ensuring that the images remind the viewer of the fact that he or she is looking at a visual interpretation of that reality, a piece of paper that is an approxi-

mation of reality. He doesn't just do this by defying the traditional aesthetic rules of photography, but also by mixing the different genres of photography, such as the (self)-portrait, the landscape, the snapshot or aerial photography.

JH Engström has lived in Paris, the city of such famous predecessors as Robert Frank, Ed van der Elsken, Christer Strömholm and Anders Petersen, intermittently for twenty years. These photographers were all pioneers in the development of photography as a medium of expression and believed in the importance of the book as a stage. It was in this city that he discovered that it would be possible for him to make a living as a photographer. His *Sketch of Paris* is an ode to the city that awoke the artistic passion inside of him and it is also evidence of the birth of a young man as an artist. Engström translated the experiences from his personal daily life between 1991 and 2012 into photographs that explore universal and existential themes. *Sketch of Paris* is a portrait of past loves, of the hectic life in a large city, of the energy of that life, of loss and happiness, and of routine and excitement. Engström is always focused on *la condition humaine*. What does it mean to be human and what challenges do human beings have to overcome during their lives? His body of work is an endless and restless search for existential answers. He uses the camera and the darkroom to get a grip on his own life and to establish meaningful communication with the viewer. He also shares his doubts about whether it is possible to truly understand what life is about. This search for *la condition humaine* not only makes the work moving, but also important in an era in which images are more superficial than ever. Engström is able to connect with emotions in an accessible way, while at the same time intelligently exploring and developing the photographic medium. A rare combination, and one that should be cherished.

Kim Knoppers, Curator Foam



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