

Aspects of a Local Art Scene: Swedish Late Modernism

HÅKAN NILSSON

In their analysis of the Swedish manifesto *Acceptera* (1930–31), Sven-Olov Wallenstein and Helena Mattsson discuss ways to understand Modernist architecture without ending up in Manfredo Tafuri's negative end. *Acceptera* followed upon the *Stockholmsutställningen*—the Stockholm Exhibition—generally understood as the fair that introduced the International Style in Sweden. Starting from this crossroad in Swedish art and architectural history, Wallenstein and Mattsson point to the plurality and non-linearity of modernism: “modern architecture must be undertaken on the basis of a multiplicity of models, and with a larger acceptance of necessary non-synchronicities that cannot just be reduced to regressive tendencies, but should be understood as a plurality inside the modern.”¹ This positioning of modernism(s) forms the point of departure for this essay, concentrating on the concrete and constructivist strands of modernism.

Looking back

The Stockholm Exhibition was not only a fair for architecture, it also included the exhibition *Post-Kubistisk-konst* (Post-Cubist Art) introducing international avant-garde artists such as Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and Theo van Doesburg (1833–1931), curated by artist Otto G. Carlsund (1897–1948). The fair's bringing together of architecture and art was considered so exemplary that the founders of Aspect, the Swedish art group that will be discussed in the conclusion to this text, could claim in 1959 that nothing of real interest had happened since then.

This nostalgic looking back is a common trope in post-war European abstraction. As one of the more influential venues for abstract art after the war, Salon des Realités Nouvelles was seen as a place for future art. Still, in its manifesto (unsigned, but probably written by August Herbin (1882–1960) and Félix del Marle (1889–1952),² published in the catalogue of the Salon des

¹ Sven-Olov Wallenstein & Helena Mattsson, *Modernism at the Crossroads* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2010), p. 41.

² See Nicola Pezolet, *Spectacles Plastiques: Reconstruction and the Debates on the “Synthesis of the Arts” in France, 1944–1962* [diss] (Massachusetts: MIT, 2008).

Realités Nouvelles exhibition in 1948, it was stated that its organizers recognized the interest as an answer to thirty years of neglect.³

Modernism after World War II was formed around its own history, which makes it quite different from the ideal of the many classic avant-gardes that understood their efforts as a break with tradition (which is also one of the reasons why Tafuri is so negative about modern post-war architecture). Modernism thus became a *sign*, whose meaning would become a site for debate and struggle. However, in the United States, postwar modernism came to be understood as something new, but only at the cost of modernism's European counterparts: "We are freeing ourselves," wrote Barnett Newman (1905–1970), "from the impediments of memory, association nostalgia, legend, myth" that he saw as the "devises of Western European painting."⁴ The same year that Herbin and del Marle saw the long awaited return of abstraction in Europe, Newman proclaimed it dead and turned to American abstraction as the "new." This understanding of American modernism stood in stark contrast to the teleological development described by Newman's contemporary, the critic Clement Greenberg, a complex history that Sven-Olov Wallenstein has eloquently engaged with numerous times.⁵ But (North) American modernism is not our topic here.

One obvious reason for the nostalgic background of Salon des Réalités Nouvelles is that it was formed by artists from the pre-war period, previous members of groups such as Abstraction-Création and Cercle et Carré. For them, the "thirty years of neglect" should be taken literary. As Romy Golan has shown in her study of leading avant-garde artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Amédée Ozenfant (1883–1963), and Le Corbusier (1887–1965), after World War I French art turned from machine aesthetics toward xenophobic, organic, naturalistic art.⁶

³ "Depuis trente ans les œuvres abstraites sont éliminées systématiquement de toutes les manifestations officielles, en France et à l'étranger, la Biennale de Venise de 1948 est le dernier en date de cet escamotage." *Premier Manifeste du Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* (1948), p. 2

⁴ Barnett Newman, "The Sublime is Now," *Tiger's Eye* (1948), p. 53.

⁵ See for instance *Den sista bilden: Det moderna måleriets kriser och förvandlingar* (Stockholm: Eriksson & Ronnefalk, 2002), or the essay "Från högmodernism till konceptkonst" in *Konsten och konståggräppet*, (Stockholm: Konsthögsk., 1996). Wallenstein also discusses the role of Newman in Lyotard's discussions on post-modernism in *Bildstrider* (Stockholm: Afbeta, 2001).

⁶ Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1995).

The postwar turn towards abstraction in Paris (which plays a certain role in what would deploy with the group Aspect in Sweden), is a story with many layers. Circulating around the Salon, the gallery Denis René, and the magazine *Art d'Aujourd'hui*, it is a question as much of artists in diaspora from all of Europe, as well as a blend of older and younger artists from France. A group of Swedish artists showed at Denis René in 1953, and it was at the gallery's exhibition "Precursors of Abstract Art in Poland" (1957) that the pioneer of abstract art Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) would be reintroduced to the art scene, now alongside Polish artists of the prewar avant-garde such as Henryk Berlewi (1894–1967), Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951), Henryk Stażewski (1894–1988), and Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952).⁷

Thus, looking back might not always be "nostalgic" or a question of a return (with a vengeance). It might also be understood as what Wallenstein above called "non-synchronicities," a deferred action, whether it is previously forgotten or not. And this deferred action takes different shapes and plays different roles, depending on when and where it deploys.

Spacing modernism

Even if the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles was founded on the sentiment that abstract art had been neglected for decades, it would not take long before artists Félix del Marle and Andre Bloc found the traditional exhibition too limiting, favoring easel painting when they sought expression in "space."⁸ They therefore formed Groupe Espace, a group that revolved round the theme of "synthesis of the arts," opting for a more total solution where preliminary visual art, sculpture and architecture would join forces to "engage in the social world," forming the new environment for the modern, anti-fascistic world. As Nicola Pezolet writes in his dissertation: "Bloc and his

⁷ Tom McDonough "The Mercurial Monochrome, or the Nihilation of Geometric Abstraction," *Adventures of the Black Square: abstract art and society 1915-2015*, ed. Iwona Blazwick (Munich: Prestel, 2015) p. 1245.

⁸ For a discussion of the forming of Groupe Espace, see Domitille d'Orgeval, "Groupe Espace—Groupe Mesure Une histoire de la synthèse des arts dans la France des années 1950 et 1960," *Groupe Espace—Groupe Mesure L'esthétique constructiviste de 1951 à 1970, une aventure du XXème siècle* (Paris: Galeri Drouart, 2010); see also Nicola Pezolet *Spectacles Plastiques* and my "Collective Modernism: Synthesising the Arts, Engaging in Society," *Art in Transfer in the Era of Pop: Curatorial Practices and Transnational Strategies*, ed. Annika Öhrner (Huddinge: Södertörn Studies in Art History and Aesthetics, 2017), pp. 289–319.

followers at Groupe Espace were hoping to create a bureaucratic organization that could potentially enact political reforms as well as manage public works—an agency that would make possible a ‘synthesis of the arts’ on a much broader social scale.”⁹ It would not be the first such attempt in history: the ambition to let abstract art reach outside the frames of the easel and blend with architecture stems from the tradition of constructivism. Russian avant-garde theorist Nikolai Tarabukin wrote his “From the Easel to the Machine” in 1923, and artists such as Lyubov Popova (1889–1924) would paint her “Painterly Architectonic” as early as 1917.

The constructivist tradition points to two discussions of greater interest. The first concerns the relationship between art forms, where artists and architects have been struggling to maintain their respective art form’s integrity while cooperating. The Polish avant-garde of the 1920’s provides illuminating examples. While the sculptures of Katarzyna Kobro sometimes could equally be understood as architecture, her and Strzemiński’s cooperation within the group *Preasens* came to a halt because of different opinions on the role of art, where the architects seem to have had an overly pragmatic and generic view.¹⁰

The second discussion concerns the much-contested question of the political relevance of aesthetic autonomy. As constructivism turned into productivism, abandoning the idea of the physical art work, many artists and theorists started considering the production of art objects to be reactionary. Historian and theorist Benjamin Buchloh saw the entire post-war abstraction that related to the constructive tradition as an aesthetization that would inevitably deprive it of any political relevance and turn it into objects that would function in the economy of bourgeoisie culture. Most of his friends in the October group have been making similar arguments, or treating post-war abstraction with neglect, as in their magnum opus *Art since 1900*.¹¹ Not all historians go so far. Christina Loedder, for instance, presents a much more nuanced image in her

⁹ Nicola Pezolet, *Spectacles Plastiques*, p. 26.

¹⁰ See “Constructivism in Poland 1923–1936: BLOK Praesens a.r.: [exhibition] Museum Folkwang, Essen 12.5 - 24.6 1973]: Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo 14.7– 2.9 1973,” p. 18.

¹¹ By the “October group” I mean the theorists in the USA that have formed the core in the prestigious art journal *October*, in particular Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster. Yve-Alain Bois is the most notable exception here, not least through his engagement with the Polish avant-garde.

“El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism” when understanding the artwork as a sometimes necessary means,¹² an “ideological vehicle.”¹³

Thus, the quest of reaching outside the “easel” can be understood in different ways. On the one hand, it radically transforms the art of painting, but on the other hand, it isn’t radical enough. It abandons the idea of what Clement Greenberg would call the “media specific,” which does not necessarily mean abandoning the idea of aesthetic autonomy. On the contrary, using “autonomy” as a means of refusing to become a mere auxiliary to architecture seems to re-insert a political potentiality.

Talk the talk

Modernism, at least when it concerns (geometric) abstraction and International Style architecture, comes with an idea of universalism. Universalism’s proponents have found the idea often struggles to gain traction in the local art worlds. Local traditions and considerations have many times proved difficult to merge with the cosmopolitan ambitions of a universalist modernism; Sweden is no exception. Universalists have often found themselves outside the core of the art scene. Otto G. Carlsund was one of the artists behind the 1930 “Art Concrete” manifesto. He had a rich international network that allowed him to form the above-mentioned exhibition at the Stockholm Exhibition, but he found little understanding or acceptance for the ideals of concrete art in Sweden. Instead, it would be a younger generation of artists who in 1947 would be identified as the “concrete” artists, a.k.a. the “Men of 1947,” including among others Lennart Rodhe (1916–2005), Olle Bonniér (1925–2016), Karl-Axel Pehrson (1921–2005) and, curiously, female artist Randi Fischer (1920–1997).¹⁴

While many of these artists indeed worked with abstraction, it is a misunderstanding to call their works “concrete.” Lennart Rodhe, who became the most influential of them all, seldom or never made “concrete” paintings, i.e. non-figurative images that do not represent anything outside themselves. Rodhe worked from landscape and similar motifs which he then abstracted.¹⁵

¹² Christina Lodder, “El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism” in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin Moscow*, eds. Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), p. 30.

¹³ I discuss this interpretation of the constructive tradition in my “Negotiating Modernism” (forthcoming in *Baltic Worlds*).

¹⁴ The name “1947 års män” was coined by critic Lars-Erik Åström in a review in *Expressen* of group exhibition “Ung form” in 1947.

¹⁵ Art historian Per Bjurström discussed this aspect of Rodhe already in the early 1950’s.

This probably contributed to his success: Rohde could easily be interpreted against the background of Swedish landscape painting, and thus inserted himself into a central strand of the local art tradition. His art could therefore be understood and accepted both by the academy where he was educated, by the art historians and critics that leaned on tradition, and by the more radical art scene longing for something “new.” It was a local modernism that came to shape the Swedish post-war art scene.

Local tradition would also play an important role for Swedish modernist architecture, in particular when it comes to the suburbs planned during the war. Then, some of the authors behind *Acceptera* would formulate a recipe for ways of building an environment for the “democratic man,” and the model suggested a turn against urbanism by constructing suburbs on the ideal of the old Swedish village; not only in terms of size, but also in terms of influence, where the old “*byråd*” (village council) was seen as the ideal.¹⁶ It was in many ways influenced by the “Neighborhood unit,” as formulated by American sociologist Clarence A. Perry in the 1920’s.

In their 1981 dissertation, sociologists Mats Franzén and Eva Sandstedt discuss the role of the neighborhood unit at length, not least from the perspective of the traditional family values it implies, with a housewife catering to the kids while the husband is at work. They suggest that this ideal surfaces at times when city planning seem to be dictated exclusively by rational perspectives.¹⁷ Thus, when the big, universal machinery creates “in-human” environments, the neighborhood unity surfaces as a conservative reaction, offering places that were small enough to create a community feeling. The early 1950s in Sweden saw both: at the same time as the suburbs were still constructed (at least planning-wise) according to the logic of the neighborhood unit, the city centers of Sweden, not least Stockholm, faced dramatic modernizations, following on more universal ideals of the modern City.

The silent treatment

The balancing between the will to be part of the universal Modernism and at the same time shape it to fit local traditions could be used as an example of

¹⁶ Not least Uno Åhren played an important role in both discussions. See his *Arkitektur och demokrati* [Architecture and democracy] (Stockholm: Kooperativa förbundet, 1942) as well as the anthology *Inför Framtidens Demokrati* [Before the Democracy of the Future], Torgny Segerstedt (ed.) (Stockholm: Kooperativa förbundets bokförlag, 1944).

¹⁷ Mats Franzén & Eva Sandstedt, *Grannskap och stadsplanering: Om stat och byggande i efterkrigstidens Sverige* [diss.] (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1981), p.139.

what Wallenstein and Mattson identified as “non-synchronicities that cannot just be reduced to regressive tendencies, but should be understood as a plurality inside the modern,” quoted above. However, universalism would also play other roles in post-war Swedish modernism, and it is to this complex I now will turn.

The literature on abstraction and various understandings of “silence,” is, as Sven-Olov Wallenstein describes it in his *The Silence of Mies*, “nothing short of inexhaustible.”¹⁸ But while the discussion of the monochrome as being simultaneously the end and the beginning of painting is well established, less thought is directed to how “silence” plays out as a strategic means. As we saw in the case of Lennart Rodhe, abstraction’s voice was heard in postwar Sweden when it spoke the language of tradition. This does not mean that there were no Swedish artists who opted for the more universal silence of Modernism, a silence that would disconnect their art from both tradition and representation, but they were, beginning with Otto G. Carlsund, often given the silent treatment: not talked about and not recognized. It could therefore be relevant to draw a provincial demarcation line between those artists who “spoke” the tradition and those who were silent towards it. If we let Lennart Rodhe represent the first side, we could let the other be represented by artist Olle Bærtling (1911–1981).

Bærtling was an autodidact and got his education following artists in France such as André Lothe (1885–1962) and Fernand Léger. He later returned to Sweden in grand style and gained much visibility for an art that seemingly was more in tune with what was happening on the Continent. In fact, Bærtling was among the many foreign artists who signed the first Groupe Espace manifesto in 1951, placing him right at the core of the abstract movement in Paris. Thus, the “silence” of abstraction would for him also mean a connection to an art world much larger and more interesting than the one that existed in back-water Sweden.

In Sweden, Bærtling would never really get the attention he thought he deserved. However, this silent treatment did not mean that he was unrecognized. Through support by theorists and historians such as Teddy Brunius (1922–2011) and Oscar Reutersvärd (1915–2002), and, perhaps more importantly, the future director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Pontus Hultén (1924–2006) (then known as K.G. Hultén), and exhibitions at estab-

¹⁸ Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *The Silence of Mies* (Stockholm: AXL books, 2008), p.68 (note 54).

lished galleries and other art venues, he was a well known, established character on the Swedish art scene. It is because of this that he would be part of the exhibition *L'art Suédois, 1913–1953: exposition d'art Suédois, cubiste, futuriste, constructiviste* at gallery Denise René in 1953, alongside, Lennart Rodhe and a few other “Men of 1947.”

As Marta Edling has shown, the Denise René exhibition excluded Swedish artists then living in Paris, many of whom would be working almost as close to the “core” as Bærtling.¹⁹ Among those silenced was Eric H. Olson, who wrote to his influential friend Michel Seuphor, who in turn published a letter in the journal *art d'aujourd'hui* where he bemoaned this very absence.²⁰

These instances of competition and ignorance help us see how the tradition/universalism antagonism could be bridged. In fact, the difference between Bærtling and Rodhe could very well have gone totally unnoticed by the French audience. At the same time, the exhibition revealed another difference between those who were successful in the Swedish context and thus were allowed into the exhibition, and those (Swedish artists) who still stood outside it, despite living in Paris and not in “back-water Sweden.” This emphasizes that the non-synchronic is always also *situated*. In order for Bærtling to use universalism as a strategic tool, he needed to also be a part of the Swedish art scene. He would there receive the “silent treatment”—a silence that meant something. This was unattainable for Eric H. Olson due to his position in Paris—he would just be ignored.

Groupe Espace

The relation between Paris and Stockholm would become more complex, however. Recently discovered letters from the Swedish artist Gert Marcus reveal that he and Eric H. Olson were in contact with André Bloc to establish a Groupe Espace in Sweden. It was not unusual, as Groupe Espace seems to have been established in many major cities in Europe between 1951 and 1956. Art historian Domitille d'Orgeval mentions branches in Italy, Belgium, Finland, Switzerland, Great Britain, Tunisia and Germany.²¹

Marcus is seldom mentioned in this context, but he was an autodidact artist who traveled frequently to Paris and France where he got involved with Salon

¹⁹ Marta Edling, “From Margin to Margin? The Stockholm Paris Axis 1944–1953,” *Konst-historisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, vol. 88, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1–16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²¹ Domitille d'Orgeval, “L'histoire du Salon des réalités nouvelles de 1946 à 1956,” www.realitesnouvelles.org/pdf/dorgeval-fullenght.pdf, p. 9.

Realités Nouvelles and came to know its circle of artists. He was very interested in the way color expresses space and cooperated many times with architects such as Hans Matell, which explains his interest in “Espace.”

In 1954, Groupe Espace Suedois seem to have been sufficiently established to organize an exhibition at gallery Brinken in Stockholm, showing, among other things, works by Eric H. Olson and André Bloc. It was no great success. Åke Meyerson at *Morgon-Tidningen* wrote that the “the thoughts that can be hinted behind the exhibition [...] deserve a better fate” Other reviewers tended to appreciate the idea of the show more than the exhibition itself. Ulf Hård af Segerstad in *Svenska Dagbladet* pointed to the “inner need” among artists and architects to cooperate, a topic much discussed in the Swedish art community at the time.

One would have thought that Olle Bærtling, one of the artists who signed the first manifesto of Groupe Espace in 1951, and who often discussed how (his) art is thought to work together with modern architecture (while avoiding turning it into “applied art”) should have been pleased with the formation of Groupe Espace in Sweden.²² But no. In a short interview in *Svenska Dagbladet* concerning the cooperation between art forms less than a month after the show, Bærtling again says that he is all for these ideas, that he was part of the forming of “d’Espace” group in Paris and that there are plans for starting one in Sweden too, thus pretending that there was no Swedish branch yet.²³ Author and critic Eugene Wretholm (1911–1982), secretary for the Swedish Groupe Espace, replied a few weeks later in the same morning paper that such a group did exist and that Bærtling, who had witnessed the exhibition, was very well aware of this fact.²⁴

Bærtling was furious. In a letter to André Bloc following upon the reply from Wretholm, Bærtling writes that the Swedish Groupe Espace had declared “a war” against him, waged by “second rate artists and architects.”²⁵ Reading the letters from Olle Bærtling and Gert Marcus to André Bloc, it becomes clear that the French artist wanted to stay out of the Swedish quarrel and not offend either side. (This was probably not solely an act of altruistic diplomacy: Bloc

²² See for instance Unsigned “Olle Bærtling” in *Konstrevy*, no. 4 (1954).

²³ Unsigned, “Konstarnas samverkan angelägen,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1954-10-29, p. 13.

²⁴ Eugen Wretholm, “Herr Redaktör,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1954-11-02, p. 4.

²⁵ “Après un interview de moi dans un journal ici le Groupe Espace Suédoise... a visiblement déclaré la guerre (*sic*) contre moi et comme en contre mes amis dans le groupe radical. [...] Le Groupe Espace Suédoise est constitué... par artistes et architectes de deuxième ordre.” Letter of 1954-11-22. I have discussed this correspondence in my “Collective Modernism.”

needed both artists for various purposes, not least catering for his own exhibitions in Sweden.)

The fate of Groupe Espace in Sweden seems not to have come to any real conclusion. In a 1955 letter to Bloc, Marcus regrets that forming the group in Sweden has stalled,²⁶ and Bloc replies only a week later that he also regrets that it seems so difficult to constitute the group.²⁷ But Bloc would soon have problems of his own with Groupe Espace, and in 1956 he left the group for “personal reasons,” soon to be followed by many influential artists. Groupe Espace did continue to exist, but as Nicola Pezolet describes, it merely “nominally stayed active.”²⁸ In a letter from 1957, Marcus writes to the new president, painter Georges Breuil (1904-1997), to propose a meeting. In the letter, Marcus states that the Swedish artists look forward to the work of the group, and that they also are interested in a planned exhibition in Brussels. This letter ends with a list of artists signatories, among them Eric H. Olson and Olle Bærtling.²⁹

Aspect

That Bærtling, Olson and Marcus could send a collectively signed letter to Groupe Espace might be best explained against another background. The networking done by Marcus and Olson had contributed to a larger awareness of what such a constellation could achieve also on a broader scale. Not only including architecture and art, but also moving pictures, music, literature and so on. It is still unclear how this broadening of the agenda came about, but it is reasonable to guess that by 1958, composer Ingvar Lidholm, editor Gunnar Hellman, and director Gösta Werner were also engaged in the challenge of forming a group that could serve to facilitate for all “radical” forces in the country. In 1959, the discussions had included more artists, and the initiators saw that it was time to form a new group, then under the working-title “Forum for Radical Culture” (*radikalt kulturforum*). The group had its constitutive meeting at the Modern Museum on May 11, 1959.

²⁶ “Nous regrettons que les efforts de fonder le groupe ici sont échoués.” Letter from Marcus to Bloc 1955-6-14.

²⁷ “Je regrette beaucoup que le Groupe Suédois ne soit pas encore constitué d’une manière définitive.” Bloc to Marcus, 1955-6-20.

²⁸ Pezolet, p. 200.

²⁹ “Surtout la participation à l’exposition de Bruxelles nous semble être d’un très haut valeur.” Marcus to Groupe Espace, 1957-12-16.

It was there renamed as Aspect, or more precisely “association aspect for the collaboration of the arts” (*föreningen aspect för konstarnas samverkan*).

The history of Aspect is short but intense, consisting not least in lobbying work: arguing for better funding for its artists.³⁰ As has already been suggested, the first annual report argues for the necessity of the association with the claim that nothing has been done of note since the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930. Should this statement be read against the Swedish art scene, it indeed places its proponents in a conservative light; not least the “Men of 1947.”

Perhaps it was the unwillingness to fall short for a criticism of forming a small elitist group that turned the only physical demonstration of Aspect into a jury-free exhibition at Liljevalchs in 1961. Judging from the catalogue, there was a gap between those who indeed looked to the Stockholm Exhibition and its legacy: here we find a homage to Otto G Carlsund and an essay by Olle Bærtling on art for the “space age.” At the same time, while the exhibition generally was understood as a manifestation of “abstract art,” it showed a plethora of expressions, including art by very diverse artists; from names that could be expected such as Lennart Rodhe and Elli Hemberg (1896–1994), to more surprising ones such as Lenke Rothman (1929–2008) and Öjvind Fahlström (1928–1976).

But maybe is there no conflict here: as Sven-Olov Wallenstein has stated apropos the silence of John Cage: silence is not absence, but an “emergence of plural and ‘unbound’ sonorities.”³¹ Against the background of the “silent” geometric abstraction rose a multiple of voices. That is a nice way to go.

³⁰ See my “Collaborative Modernism” where I describe some of the work of aspect.

³¹ Wallenstein, *The Silence of Mies*, p. 76.