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Body and Language, Space and Image

Ann Edholm was recently feted for her almost monumental painting Übergang shown at The Moderna Exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in the autumn of 2010 as well as for her proposal for a curtain for the large ECOSOC session chamber at the UN headquarters in New York that same autumn. As with the earlier “wound paintings” and, in particular, the almost three metre tall paintings of recent years with their sharply etched geometrical images, here and there “smeared” almost invisibly with finger prints and other painterly impressions, it is surely no accident that the proposal for the UN too corresponds so consistently to the fundamental intention that she has pursued over the years of giving expression to the relationship between image and body, image and space; essentially the physical presence in relation to the conceptual idea as one of the picture’s foremost communicative elements, its *raison d’être*.

In this respect, Ann Edholm is not just unique in contemporary Swedish art but is also one of the most consistent proponents. And so, inspired by Barnett Newman and the mediaeval tradition of Christ’s progress along the Via Dolorosa, she has spent six years working on a series of paintings which was originally planned to comprise all fourteen stations of the cross but that now consists of twice that number with the painting Übergang as a sort of fixed final station, though preliminary. Referring both to the series of paintings called Tongue on the Tip and, in particular, the series of engravings under the heading Tango d’amour (1998), in conjunction with an exhibition held jointly with Håkan Rehnberg that was shown at the art museum in Eskilstuna as well as at Millesgården in Stockholm in the spring of 2007, she described the project in a manner that leaves no room for doubt regarding precisely the relationship between image and body:

In my paintings the beholder is in a frontal position, body to body, seen from in front. You see the picture at a distance and the closer you get to it the more the picture dissolves into colour, body and painting.

The series of paintings that I call Tongue on the Tip has its point of departure in a little yellow and black painting I did in 1995 that I called The Word on the Tip of the Tongue. I was trying to express the original experience of the proverbial business of a word being at the tip of one's tongue but in reverse so that the tongue is suddenly experienced as a wet and fleshy bodily organ lying on the word one wants. The tongue can readily be experienced precisely as a part of the body that moves sideways from painting to painting and from word to word. And, hopefully, it is precisely this parallel progress along the paintings that gives rise to the narrative; a passion story that was intended finally to comprise fifteen large "stations" dealing precisely with nothing else but the grand existential questions of life, love and death, desire and suffering. But as soon as you pause and take the decisive step in towards the painting, the painting becomes the body that you are yourself – and the words of the narrative become your own body, your tongue on the word, wet and pregnant with all sorts of other narratives. And so the suite of 14 engravings from 1998 came to be called Tango d'amour at the time that I started work on the extended series with the assurance of simply not knowing in which direction it would lead. Painting as body reveals the body and pronounces the word.

Ann Edholm manages to combine painting with sculpture, space with thought, concept, idea and the human body in a communion that, at the same time, comprises all of the equally subtle and artistically significant aspects that these promote and require. It has also been claimed that, ever since the beginning of the 1980s, her work has concentrated on developing an approach in which painting opens itself as both a speaking and a listening medium without compromising its material nature as involving anything else than, for example, such basic necessities as brushes and pigments, oil, turpentine, squeegee, cotton canvas, wooden stretcher, staple gun, hammer and nails. For her – according to critic Anders Olofsson – it is natural to use painting as a medium for testing all of the relationships between figures and volumes that have often led other artists to sculpture or to a physically much heavier style of painting in which the canvases acquire the character of massive objects: each line, each form that seeks out a place on her canvases is also, in a physical sense, the bearer of narratives that emanate from our meeting the image in the same way that the human body is the home of language. Perhaps this is the real secret underlying Ann Edholm's ability to attract both body and idea: her way of expressing the strange combination of physical presence and intellectual urgency in a manner in which both collaborate with each other without being separated.

All of this becomes all the more convincing when related to her public commissions, of which the installation Tango d'amour (1998), in the covered atrium of the Institute of Education at Umeå University, in particular continues to preserve its immediate and readily comprehended contact specifically with painting and the effects that are rooted in the very technique, since the work actually consists of five large paintings on canvas. This does not, of course, mean that Edholm has abandoned her concern with issues that painting gives rise to, that is painting's specific attitude to both the conceptual framework as well as the formal prerequisites in her later spatial works. Rather the reverse, since in both Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm, Tirana, Umeå and, most recently, in New York, she lets painting – qua painting – together with related visual idioms interact with the image in its capacity of being an architectonic element in relation to space both as three-dimensional quality and domain of experience; a place for the encounter of the beholder, the particular space, the body, the thought and the special feelings that are aroused by and that grow from this meeting.

And if the particular character of painting is precisely this strange – yet always beguiling – coupling between visual figuration and physical proximity, then all of her spatial expressions or, rather, installations, are conditioned by precisely painting as a venue for the encounter between gaze, body and thought; the topographical focus on our existential preconditions. And so it is no accident that, in the notebook from the beginning of the 1990s, she refers to the word "house" and unites it to her own body, windows, openings, cavities, blackness and night, the "other room":

The house as starting point, as navel, as myself.

The house that sees me, that holds me, that is my second dwelling.

The house as a second space.

Accordingly, Ann Edholm's exhibition at the Olle Olsson house in Solna just outside Stockholm in the winter of 2000 also assumed the form of an installation that occupied more or less the entire building. This was an exhibition that, thematically, concerned itself with both the idyllic painted wooden house in the park between Solna's suburban high-rise apartment buildings and the house as concept and idea. She herself referred both to the little house in direct relation to the human body and the house as "room where thoughts can move in and out, a special place, a museum for memories and thoughts". In her sketchbook she also referred to her own body at the same time that she let "a street lamp", turned upside down, hang in front of a text on the wall that was exactly as long, or as tall, as she is herself. The text was concerned

– if the expression is permissible – with the “phenomenology” of doors and windows; these blind, black but paradoxically sighted openings and cavities, those ever-curious, staring eyes and open mouths that return in work after work: black circles, squares and rectangles that arouse the beholder’s sense both of participation and responsibility.

Passing Through a Wall

Ann Edholm’s large wall painting in the new law courts in Helsingborg, painted in 2005, was entitled Transire. This is a title that perhaps demands just as much reflection as the painting itself presupposes of visual and lingering bodily attention. The word “transire” is the infinitive form of the Latin verb “transeo” and means to pass through or to cross. This etymological root has also given us a word like “transit” in the sense of passage through. And this is also the meaning that Ann Edholm fastened for at first hand as a direct reference not only to the doors into the courtrooms, which were, so to speak, placed directly onto the painting at the same time they were integrated into the image as functional openings into the rooms behind the painting. The title also refers to the fact that the floor and ceiling respectively that divide the glazed façade run right through the painting at right angles like a knife cutting through the very flesh of the painting. Besides the fact that the court rooms can be defined as a type of transit halls, given the localization of the law courts in direct contact with the harbour in Helsingborg, it is not unimportant either that the word “transire” is also used in the shipping industry to denote the customs documents covering goods that the vessel has to declare in foreign ports.

Transire is no mere abstract mural; perhaps not abstract at all in view of the doors being part of the painting and of its own physical impact. One cannot stress too strongly the fact that Transire is a single large painting that binds together the floors in a thematic, visual totality in which the glass façade of the building reflects the dissected image at the same time that this becomes evident in its totality only when one looks in at it through the glass façade. The painting’s upper and lower parts are in separate spaces within the façade at the same time that the painting is only united into its desired whole when viewed from outside. In a Swedish context this is something truly remarkable.

As visual expression, the large painting builds, in other words, on an ingenious sort of perspectival effect in which the lines of escape also run in towards the black centre of the painting, which, in turn, plays with the black volume of the building above the glass. On the levels respectively the 60-centimetre broad bands make one feel as though one is “wading through colour up to the

knees”, as Ann Edholm put it in her project description. Simultaneously, one’s impression on viewing the work from the parking area below the law courts, for example, or from the harbour a little further away, is reinforced by the fact of the composition being derived from precisely the central perspective. A decisive aspect of the work is the fact also that the exact point at which painting and wall meet where the glass façade “ends” at the third column in the direction of the wood-lined entrance hall is marked by a raised relief effect of a few millimetres which means that the painting can be experienced as body pierced by doors and openings, in correspondence with the visitor’s own body in the room. Especially at dusk and at night when indirect light caresses the surface that has been gently mottled using rubber scrapers and brushes and, with its particular, brilliantly colourful, radiance the painting also seems to lift the building high above its surroundings.

Transire may also be regarded as perhaps the grandest summary in Swedish contemporary art of a long succession of decisive thematic and artistic impulses in a remarkably single-minded artistic career, in terms of the artist’s public commissions from the Institute of Education in Umeå to her proposal almost two years ago for decorating the travel centre in the same town – a project that was not realized – and, not least, the proposal for a curtain for the UN building in New York, Ann Edholm’s hitherto most extensive commission with special obligations to the prestigious artistic context, the specific architecture of the venue and the work’s introduction into the framework of contemporary art. Thus it is not just the work’s monumentality that makes the Helsingborg painting – with the exception of the UN proposal – the largest single painting by Ann Edholm in a series of large paintings. In point of fact it appears as a sort of unique assembly point for ideas and practices that have engaged Ann Edholm right since the start of her career almost thirty years ago. Ideas, for example, concern the visual image’s relationship to the human body and our bodily experience both of architectonic space and the two-dimensional surface; as well as the painted image as both concrete object and continuing “linguistic” narrative statements.

At the same time, the Helsingborg painting seems both to summarize and to transcend the process that has long been more or less apparent in Ann Edholm’s work, from the ragged, open wounds that were characteristic of her paintings in the 1980s and early 1990s towards the increasingly graphically distinct visual element that can be seen as dark holes, openings and doors and, at the same time as merely and fundamentally abstract, strictly two-dimensional forms, faced with which the viewer ends up in an ambivalent, grey area between surface and space, between the two-dimensional image and the bodily experience.

The artistic process is often both creatively unpredictable and something that meanders along one chain of associations after another. One of the stops on the way that led on to Helsingborg was clearly the winning proposal for the commission of the industrial landscape in Norrköping that Ann Edholm presented in 1998, a proposal that, however, never was realised, for reasons for which never were accounted by the organizers. The other stop was located some way beyond the little Russian town of Vishny-Volochok on the remarkably straight road between St. Petersburg and Moscow. There was also a third halt: the first sketch which showed that it was necessary to abandon the original idea as a sort of temporary stop for breath on the journey to that instant when Ann Edholm finally found herself in the new law courts – with construction scarcely completed – together with two of her assistants.

The proposal for Norrköping took account both of the singular and “fantastic” architecture surrounding the Motala flow as well as Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, which was published in 1872, almost at the same time that the industrial buildings were being erected in Norrköping. This is an industrial landscape that willingly opens itself for diverse associations on such concepts as space, site and image; a landscape that is as marked by constructions and deconstructions, acoustic, tactile and visual ideas as Lewis Carroll’s story about how Alice passes through the mirror as though it were any door. There are both dominant spaces as well as odd, inaccessible seamy backsides or firewalls as empty as Carroll’s nonsense verses in the topsy-turvy world behind the mirror. Ann Edholm’s proposal made use of the entire surroundings, using no very severe visual architectonic measures and, like Lewis Carroll, played with gently manipulated scales and proportions while, at the same time, investigating the ability of a visual treatment to turn these inside-out with the help, for example, of blind windows and black door-openings that were actually abstract pictorial elements.

The Black, Blackened Icon

Where Ann Edholm conversed with Lewis Carroll in Norrköping, in the Russian town of Vishny-Volochok she had evidently arranged to meet two not wholly unknown artists, namely the Russian suprematist Kazimir Malevich and the American abstract expressionist Barnett Newman. The meeting took place in the summer of 2002 in a little travellers’ chapel that the Empress Catherine the Great had erected at the end of the 18th century on one of the tributaries of the Volga. The meeting was prompted by a course in landscape painting organized jointly by the Valand School of fine Arts in Gothenburg and the Academy of fine Arts in Moscow. Ann Edholm herself has related that the chapel, with its octagonal

cupola and stained-glass windows, made her think of a landscape which enclosed her like a body; an interior and exterior landscape in which the stained-glass windows gave associations to Malevich’s red cavalry on the endless Russian steppes as well as Newman’s equally famous painting *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* from 1966.

Speaking of icons, one may note that Ann Edholm called her first solo exhibition at Galerie Nordenhake in 1994 precisely *Eikon*, the concept that trickles into the sacred image, the icon and which, from the 6th century onwards is used exclusively to denote “the sacred image”, the icon, the Ur-image of ultimate divinity. The icon is also special in that it is both a picture and, at the same time, a thoroughly material object whose reverse perspective means that the lines of escape converge in the beholder’s own gaze, thereby allowing us to see and to be seen simultaneously. As a picture it requires its own material existence in order to be precisely a picture, a representation that refers to something other than itself, something beyond itself. The image is both the literal, material object as well as something else. Here, too, a sort of incarnation is effectuated: the word becomes image and flesh at the same time that the image reveals both its linguistic and its “fleshly” character; that character that has such a central position in Ann Edholm’s art through her surfaces consisting of layer upon layer of paint mixed with wax. “It is through the body that I see”, she remarks. Out of this which cannot be pictured, out this without a language an image is created together with its meaning, language and its vocabulary. This is also something of a metaphorical image of the Christian incarnation, God’s sacrifice to humanity which necessitated His taking human form and becoming a person of flesh and blood out of compassion for the misery and temporary nature of the human condition – Christ was both God, Holy Spirit and human being, a suffering, stigmatized and crucified person who, at the ninth hour, posed the most difficult of all questions before breathing his last and beginning his journey down into the realm of death, having uttered the words “Eloi, eloi, lema sabachtani?”, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Only a few years were to elapse after *Eikon* before Ann Edholm was ready to present her large graphic suite entitled *14 Concepts – Tango d’amour* at Galerie Nordenhake in Stockholm. These had indirect references to the earlier paintings with Mickey-Mouse-like configurations based on the Spanish Baroque painter Francisco de Zurbarán’s version of Veronica’s cloth which hangs in the National Museum in Stockholm. The suite was rounded off with an extensive text that, in the view of the artist, was to be understood as a narrative transformed into an image, a narrative that starts with a direct reference to the legend of the cloth that Veronica handed to the Son of Man on his way to Mount Calvary:

Christ presses the cloth on his face and lets the image emerge. So is the first painting made, an impression that becomes an image, the image formed on the surface of the fracture between the cause of the image and the substance upon which it is built. Christ is the origin of the world in the same way that the engraving plate reveals the image of its own origin. The beholder is pierced by the image's gaze just as Christ is pierced by the nails upon the cross – creating the wound that both sees and allows itself to be seen. The road of woe leads up to Golgotha, the first conception of love and of divine grace. Here on the cross, in the darkness of the ninth hour, the promise is given of the passionate encounter with the Other, face to face, body to body, in a Tango d'amour. A rhythmical dance, a sweeping, whirling dance of love in which every step, every element, every image, develops the narrative's syntactic passage in station after station, conception after conception, from the virginal promise of the empty white square to the final black circle's completion, just as black as the blinding sun that turns the moon on and off and that dots the heavens with small twinkling eyes. Along the path up the hill with Adam's white bones and his motionless, staring skull, Christ is nothing but a suffering, frail, anguished, terrified and doubting human being in the same way that the circles and squares of the narrative are merely circles and squares and yet – despite everything – something else too: linguistic signs and constructions, rhetorical pauses, the tiniest parts of the narrative. Some of these refer to Barnett Newman, others to Francesco Clemente, Matthias Grünewald, Caspar David Friedrich and Walt Disney... – a true Corpus. But in between a red image, like lipstick – a colour that is all and is nothing, three white squares on a red ground, or the reverse: a red image on a white ground. Both a face and absolutely nothing, an empty pause, drained, emptied and simultaneously filled with meaning, overloaded with promises that lead on towards the black sun, blinded by its own light.

The conversation between the three artists – Kazimir Malevich, Barnett Newman and Ann Edholm – continued in front of another little Orthodox chapel, a wooden structure that someone had built on a slope leading down to the river. and which gate was carefully locked. In this Ann Edholm suddenly happened upon a little dark "cat-door" that gave rise to associations with her Norrköping proposal with its openings, doors and blind windows. She could, of course, not help pointing her camera through the cat-door and capturing the little icon that someone had hung on the eastern altar wall within the otherwise empty, dark chapel. Here the image was incarnated, the image of the great mystery behind the locked

gate, giving an immediate result in the little diptych The Chapel/ Cypress with two photographs portraying the blocked gate and the interior of the chapel with the icon respectively together with a painting of a standing black rectangle surrounded by a shining yellow border, a painting with obvious associations to the large painting entitled Pompeii from 2001 which, according to the artist herself, was born out of a meeting with a black cat with shining, yellow eyes full of curiosity.

The collegial discussions in the spectacularly open but magical, lusciously green landscape outside Vishny-Volochok resulted four large paintings named after the little Russian town. This was a series of paintings with a large black field at the centre with, above and below, horizontal bands of yellow, orange, blue and green. In February of the following year Ann Edholm showed them at the Gothenburg Museum of Art together with the paintings Garden and My Darkness in which the black centre was surrounded on all sides by the coloured bands so that a sense of depth was achieved with regard to the centre. The artist has herself claimed these paintings as a type of film clips or landscape scores; landscapes turned into surface, image and text to be read by and through the body in the room.

Here, in both the monumental paintings, these huge "landscapes" à la russe, as well as in the considerably smaller diptych, the artist had thus captured a reality that is so real that it dazzles the gaze like the flash in the little black opening in the locked gate. Behind the façade – the painted surface – behind the simple wooden façade, one glimpses a room where the cat lives, precisely that room that opens the painting to the inconceivable. And the paint, layer upon layer of black oil paint mixed with wax; the paint is as black as the cat, as black as the night, as black and as dense as the starry sky, yet also as brilliant as Malevich's horizon with the red cavalry, as sudden as Newman's "zips", those rapid, vertical cuts in the painting that allegorize the moment of creation itself: "Let there be light". This is the mute yet infinitely communicative painting's credo, wondrously vibrating in its uncompromising realism.

Like in an almost therapeutic elaboration Ann Edholm linked this remarkable suite of paintings with the highly concrete loss of her childhood home in an apostrophizing "litany" after receiving the news that the house had been sold and had been altered out of all recognition because the municipality would never have granted planning permission for a new house in this sensitive area just outside Stockholm:

The fir tree has blown down
is gone now.
My childhood home
is gone now.

My childhood home
is gone now.
The distance between things
is gone now.
The charged field of childhood,
the interstices
the interruptions
time
are gone now.
The light switch and the door frame
are gone now.

As Ann Edholm then was commissioned to “decorate” the new law courts in Helsingborg, she paused, momentarily, at yet another stop. In Helsingborg she visited the construction site of the law courts, walking about beneath the scaffolds and cranes and measuring the respective wall surfaces of the two floor levels inside the large, horizontally divided glass wall facing onto the harbour above which the rectangular-shaped black volume of the building rests like a species of hovering monolith above the glass façade. The total area of the wall turned out to be almost 135 m² with a length of almost fifteen metres penetrated by five doors on one level and three on the other that lead into the courtrooms and other premises.

The proposal that Edholm now cultivated went under the working title of Under, making use of ideas that had come to mind while working on the Norrköping proposal and at Vishny-Volochok: a black field running right across the wall on the lower level that would stretch up through the ceiling to continue through the floor of the upper level where it would meet the same horizontal bands as in the landscape paintings shown in Gothenburg. The field on the lower level has an irregular, ragged bottom edge by the floor with obvious associations to the earlier “wound paintings”. She wanted the levels to have different characters: that there should be a lower, a middle and an upper level that would indirectly allude to how traditional Orthodox icons are built up in a sort of triune layering with three horizontal bands associating to heaven, earth and the underworld. The “moon” from Norrköping reappeared in the form of an upside-down “street lamp” that touched the floor of the lower level and whose supporting chord rose up in a pipe through the ceiling and so on up through floor and ceiling to the upper level until it disappeared into the roof at the top. But since the building houses the law courts there are very strict safety regulations in place and no loose objects are allowed immediately outside the courtrooms. This made the lamp problematical and Ann Edholm and the architect agreed to think again.

The link between the two levels, which was to have been achieved by the upside-down moon of the original proposal has now been accomplished by letting Transire function in this way in its entirety. The artist has bound together the two spaces by simply turning her standing painting My Darkness through 180 degrees so that the black centre of the image is now cut in two by the ceiling / floor which divides the glass façade into two halves. Further, the hardwood doors leading into the courtrooms and other premises – including a security passage – have, in a manner of speaking, been applied or pasted to the painting while being integrated into the visual entirety as highly concrete openings inwards towards the rooms behind. Even the two spaces behind the glass façade suddenly appear as a sort of transit hall for one's gaze seeking out the total image., the gaze sweeping over and penetrating the façade to be bounced back by the doors on both levels and, in one's thoughts, forcing their way through the openings thereby transcending the limitations of the room and of concrete reality; if, that is, you do not happen to be a judge, magistrate or accused, for in that case you will enter the painting just as Wu Tao Tzu entered the picture in the classical Chinese legend. The process of transcending awaits. With regard to its title, Transire is truly a transcendental painting in the most literal sense of the word.

The Sirens On the Subway

If Transire immediately connects with Vishny-Volochok, then the sixteen colourfully geometricized paintings on aluminium (2007) in the entrance hall to one of the apartment buildings in a block known as Stettin in the Gärdet suburb of Stockholm build on Ann Edholm's Wide-Open-Shut, which is a series of four paintings that were shown at Galerie Nordenhake in Stockholm back in 2000 and were included in her major retrospective at the art museum in Uppsala in 2003; a series that was then further developed in yet another suite of six engravings. That the immediate source of inspiration is Stanley Kubrick's film Eyes Wide Shut (1999) is definitely no accident in the case of an artist who, throughout her career, has actualized and sought to give expression to precisely the gaze and the vision as involving the body's direct collaboration in perception. In the film this is a process that is problematized as what is at times a very unpleasant “sublime” erotic interaction which ends in the concluding orgy in which all of the participants are wearing “Venetian” masks and black cloaks. It is not entirely evident, though worth a suspicion, that the artist has chosen her title precisely as a reference to the underlying theme of the film in which inner and outer events, imagination and reality, blindness and sightedness endlessly elide as a sort of meaningful warp to the cinematic weft.

As the site-specific installation on each side of the staircase was entitled *Sirens*, but perhaps in particular with the explicit reference to the paintings' visual configurations dominated by circles and squares, sometimes as open mouths, sometimes as staring eyes, it gives rise to thoughts not just of screaming, grimacing but also of singing faces, as well as to how the musical score is composed as a sequence of linearly progressing visual elements according to specific notes and rhythmical sounds; a visual piece of music develops immediately in direct relation to the way in which we move in the room, with and through the body's active collaboration, via the gaze that, with curiosity and a sense of commitment, investigates how the notes move sideways with and against ourselves.

Without directly dealing with the installation's conceptual sounding board, if such a term be allowable, Ann Edholm describes the work herself in her notes accompanying the proposal, as just possible to regard as a textual, narratively growing composition carefully adapted to the architecture of the room, in the final instance as an interplay that is as carefully thought out, subtle and artistically expressed between body and thought as was Transire:

Shouting and screaming, making faces.

Advancing towards the beholder at the same time as moving sideways.

In the architecture there is a symmetry that I want to emphasize in the positioning of the paintings.

With a centre in the staircase, a cold grimace, a black gape, a symmetry from the centre in both directions but with a certain shift of expression on the part of the sirens.

Initially one can believe that the work is entirely symmetrical, but one then realizes that this is not the case. One can then move back and forth and discover the differences which then implode as one loses count of what one has passed.

To be confronted by the entire work at the same time that it carries a narrative that wanders back and forth in the reading process.

A meeting of body and intellect.

The four paintings were also exhibited at the exhibition entitled Språk är ett virus från yttre rymden [Language is a Virus From Outer Space] at the art museum of Norrköping during the autumn of 2010 together with Lotta Mossum, Britta Kjellgren, Lars Arrhenius, Tuija Lindström, Silja Rantanen, Pekka Nevalainen, Jan Kaila, and Gary Hill, all of whom are engaged in trying to give expression to linguistic signs and their importance as part of the textual sequence in the narrative; the narration. Ann Edholm's contribution was a suite of paintings that were as blinding as they were large and which, with their black and orange-coloured circles and

squares caused the public, both with an element of shameful surprise and delighted recognition, to associate with open mouths and staring eyes, at the same time that the title Wide-Open-Shut – naturally – perplexed them and posed questions. Was it really allowable to associate with Kubrick's film? And was it really permissible to arouse the visual memory of Edvard Munch's screaming girl when we had finally left the old, bleeding century behind us? The paintings answered with a ringing affirmative, vigorously insisting at the same time that they gazed into our own eyes, undoubtedly said: yes.

The paintings give expression to a sort of visual linguistic ability that, moreover, is reminiscent of contemporary poetry like that of Katarina Frostensson, for example, or Eva-Stina Byggmäster; a poetic world in which the meanings are constantly in movement and where the key concept is the associative opposite to the symbolic, to that which opens up to interpretations in every possible direction within the same syntactical sequence. In connection with the series of paintings the artist herself explained that she had constantly sought to charge the image with as many paths as possible rather than seeking to formulate a single assertion: "The word – the visual sign – becomes the possible point for the movement of thought and body". Each sign is filled with and soaked in meanings just like the material's own corporality, regardless of whether it is a matter of oil on canvas or of black ink on paper. The ideas that she noted down for the printer Ole Larsen in Helsingborg are just as demanding and as unequivocal as the pictures themselves:

Make an even sharper square, increase the blackness, colder, colder orange, pull it together with drypoint and then rub over it, temper it with just a little dirt – kill the picture, paint, paint.

And another note intended for the printers at Ateljé Larsen with statements that would seem applicable to the studio in Lid just as much as the efforts at the printing presses on Krook Street in Helsingborg:

Make a proof on white paper, violently biting orange, blacker than blue-black – make it precise, pull it together, tear it apart, roughen up the edges of the square, add another layer of white, white paint white as a sheet, more dirt round the edges of the square make holes in the pupils – imprint, imprint the heart's darkness, eyes like dinner plates, a wide-open shut world, without language, visual.

Like all of her public commissions, *Sirens* too naturally has thematic and formal points in common with Ann Edholm's work in

general. According to the project description, the installation can be characterized as a "tribute to both art and the sea which opens up beyond Gärdet and the harbour where the foghorns sound their warning song across the water". By reminding us of the musical score and its rhythmical sequences Sirens also, of course, links up with the famous episode in the twelfth song of the Odyssey in which Ulysses, warned by the "witch" Kirke, gets his men to tie him to the mast of his ship so that he will be able to listen to the song of the sirens while his crew put wax in their ears in order to be able to withstand the seductive song and to steer the ship on towards Scylla and Charybdis. In Greek mythology the sirens were birdlike female beings whose bewitching song caused seamen to forget to steer their ships and to jump overboard and swim to the island of Anthemoessa where they were either killed by the sirens or faded away while listening to their singing.

According to the German philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the myth of Ulysses' meeting with the sirens illustrates the birth of Western art music as well – and with it art in general – in which the tension between the sirens' corrupting temptations and the fact that Ulysses lets himself be bound to the mast in order to be able to listen to their song in spite of the risks, answers to the tension between our original nature and the culture that all authentic art builds on. Ulysses does not attempt to take a different route to avoid the sirens, nor does he face their temptations with the confidence that his freedom of choice is sufficient protection. No, he ensures that, in spite of consciously distancing himself from nature, he is yet able to remain faithful to it as listener. In this way he is obedient to nature – the sirens – simultaneously as he struggles against it; as he stands there bound to the mast, he struggles to free himself and to leap into the seductive embrace. Ulysses recognizes the ancient superiority of the song by letting himself be tied up, but he gives into to the tempting calls while simultaneously abhorring them like death itself. The power of song is as mighty as it is broken, and art has struggled ever since with the fundamental incompatibility between nature and song, between animal, bodily urges and the ability of art to claim them as worthy of being desired and striven for.

Ann Edholm, who likes to paint with layer upon layer of thick, "bodily" perceptible paint tenderly smoothed with a squeegee or a sponge, combines both the "call of desire" with the distancing impact of the language, of the image; language as image and sign, sign and image.

Placed, as they are, on either side of the central section of the staircase in the entrance hall, the Sirens seeks both to emphasize and, at the same time, to "deconstruct" the architectonic symmetry in roughly the same way as the newly built lift next to the stairs. Here the same type of expression is generated as in

Wide-Open-Shut, namely a sideways movement at the sudden discovery of the in-built rhythmical breaches of the basic symmetry. This symmetry is emphasized by the columns in the room and by the round, mirroring lamps suspended from the ceiling, which exactly repeat the size of the circles in the paintings. And because the paintings are hung at a little distance from the wall, their basically frontal character is underlined by the sideways movement of the score. The beholder confronts the work in a rhythmically frontal encounter at the same time that we are given the opportunity to read the work as an on-going narrative song. The combination of "original" bodily experience and intellectual reflection which, according to the myth of the sirens forms the civilizatory foundation of art itself, is actualized here.

Mickey Mouse Encounters the Light

In the autumn of 2004 Ann Edholm had an exhibition in Galerie Nordenhake's temporary apartment-gallery in Stockholm. One particular painting that she called Tongue on the Tip / Bile caught the attention of visitors, a painting that was described as a black grid laid upon a gently vibrating but nevertheless intense yellow surface. According to the critic Håkan Nilsson in the newspaper Dagens Nyheter this was "quite simply one of Edholm's best works" thanks to the fact that the yellow surface, in contrast to her earlier surfaces that were more or less completely covered, now revealed a gap that led the gaze into the surface of the image at the same time that the grid repelled the vision. According to Håkan Nilsson, Ann Edholm had solved the problem with the multiplicity of details in an unusually elegant manner by painting a rich, yellow surface with, on top of it, a black grid that created an "angry throbbing that draws out and repulses in turn", something that Håkan Nilsson thought caused one not really to be able to place oneself. References to art, culture and the history of ideas are legions in Ann Edholm's work including everything from central motifs of Christian art, Veronica's cloth, Matthias Grünewald, Caspar David Friedrich, Barnett Newman and the Russian suprematists to Rainer Maria Fassbinder, Andrei Tarkovsky and Mickey Mouse, of whom the latter was first crucified at Golgatha in 14 Conception – Tango d'amour, as mentioned before shown at Galerie Nordenhake in Stockholm in 1998, and then again encountering the light in a gigantic mural at a senior school – Frans Suell's och Jörgen Kock's gymnasium – in Malmö. The painting extends not just over two floors like Transire, but over all four storeys of the school with its black grid above a brilliant, poisonous yellow ground. It is a strangely illusive painting in that one can never experience it in all its monumentality, but only as a thought experienced in the body, an experience of its possibilities both as image and thought as expression and physical reality, lived in and through the body.

The three access galleries are only a few metres from the wall and, from them, it is almost impossible to survey all fourteen vertical metres of the painting while the same painting appears to rise up in more or less superhuman proportions viewed from the ground floor, since the glass wall in front of the galleries leans at such an angle that in daylight the sky is reflected in it which naturally makes it difficult to see the wall behind if the lights are not turned on in the large entrance hall. The entirety of the painting is only graspable in very particular light conditions, if not exclusively in thought, in the thought of the body thinking as it reads the image in the room.

The promises laid out in the original proposal for the monumental painting, called Mickey Mouse Meets the Light, have thus been kept in every aspect. The project description had promised to “cover the entire wall with a grid of black and yellow checks through all four storeys that interact, architecturally, with the scale and the dimensions of the hall in relation both to the check pattern of the windows close by, and the angled windows opposite that lean inwards, so that a monumental impression of liberation arises on account of the work’s emphasis on the light that flows in through the grid”.

Mickey Mouse Meets the Light alludes ultimately to Raphael’s portrayal of how the archangel Michael frees the apostle Peter from prison in Rome in one of the famous frescoes in the Vatican painted in 1512 and is also accompanied by an old library display case with a glass lid in which that artist has placed Konrad Oberhuber’s large book about Raphael in a French translation published in 1999 and open precisely at the page where St. Peter’s liberation is portrayed. But the archangel in the illustration in the book has been replaced by three black circles that form the famous Mickey Mouse-figure as a sort of sly wink to our own time and its popular iconography – with special layers of meaning and resonances from the history of ideas.

With its references to how the archangel Michael frees St. Peter from his captivity constantly apparent in the displayed book, the large installation thus excites the notion of the close link between knowledge and freedom, between art and knowledge, between art and the freedom to think “freely and grandly” – a fitting motto to any course in the senior school; not least in this one that has a large measure of aesthetic and artistic programmes. Indeed, Mickey Mouse Meets the Light necessarily leads us back to the Tongue on the Tip / Bile and the sketch that originally accompanied the painting as its conceptual point of reference, a reproduction of Raphael’s fresco with a Mickey Mouse configuration fixed above the archangel with ordinary adhesive tape used by any painter. At this point one of the most famous icons of popular culture meets up with the Raphael of “high culture” in an almost

violent embrace of colours and light that were also intended not just to allude to the school’s breadth of teaching but that the fact of it being an aesthetic senior school that unites theory and artistic practice makes it the right place for a picture that is ultimately concerned with freedom and liberation.

Moreover, Mickey Mouse Meets the Light was also – according to the original proposal and as executed – intended to accentuate the architectonic interplay between inside and outside of the dedicated room as well as the play between the horizontality of the different floors in relation to the almost giddy vertical sense of the painting. Even if the painting also interacts with the grid of the vertical window wall as well as with the in-leaning windows opposite, it is in relation to the slightly larger scaled yellow and black grid an indisputable fact that the painting gives rise to a feeling, at the same time, of an almost frenziedly monumental perspective viewed from the ground floor. This sensation is then transported up to the other floors without losing its inner force. In this way the real size and scale of the hall are emphasized, as well as the importance of physical presence, something that is further emphasized by the fact that the wall is on two levels, that the painting has to be understood as a two-dimensional projection on two surfaces at the same time; that is to say that the impression of there being a single large painting requires the beholder to place her or himself at a very special point in the room, a point which, in fact, is impossible because of the monumental scale of the whole enterprise. The impression of the whole thereby also becomes a conceptual matter in and through the body.

Mickey Mouse Meets the Light is dominated, as noted, by the intense yellow colour along side the black grid which symbolizes the way in which knowledge liberates and opens itself through the light streaming in. At the same time it must be accidental that it is precisely the yellow colour that, in the esoteric, paranormal tradition, is connected with “the intellect’s best stimulus”; the colour that stimulates the nerves and sharpens memory. According to this tradition yellow ought to be a natural colour for school classrooms, for instance, since yellow associates to intellect, clarity, consciousness, concentration and sunlight. At the same time the colour yellow is also considered to prevent difficulties in learning and to give the room a sense of warmth also during the cold winter months.

Very properly, the same lemon-yellow colour found in both the Tongue on the Tip from 2004 and in the Mickey Mouse Meets the Light turns up again in the Albanian capital Tirana where Ann Edholm let the façade of an apartment building on the Bardhyl Unaza ring road, which is fronted mainly by grey apartment blocks, be painted with the same black grid and Mickey Mouse figure on the end of the building as in the previous works, here on

a literally monumental scale, almost 70 metres in length and 20 metres wide, on a building complex stretching up to five storeys that were entirely refurbished for the art biennial in Tirana in October 2009. This commission was part of a project started in 2003 by Mayor Edi Rama of letting more than forty façades be decorated by internationally recognized artists including Olafur Eliasson, Dominique Gonzalez Foerster, Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

Ann Edholm's instructions to the organizers responsible for the project in Tirana were reminiscent of concrete poetry:

DESIGN OF FACADE

Buildings 40 and 41, Bardhyl Unaza

Referring to invitation by the Mayor of Tirana, Mr. Edi Rama, March 18, 2009, and the curators Mrs. Joa Ljungberg and Mr. Edi Muka, March 23, 2009, I hereby send to you the proposed design for façades of the buildings #40 and #41 to be included in the "painting of façades" project in connection to the 4th edition of the Tirana International Contemporary Art Biennial.

Title of the design: Les confrontations dramatiques.

The design indirectly refers to a fresco by Raphael in Stanza di Eliodoro in the Vatican painted in 1514 depicting the deliverance of Saint Peter, who has been replaced by an image reminding of Mickey Mouse. This image should be painted on the rear facade of the building #41, while the front façades of both buildings are provided with a black grid painted on the bright yellow walls. Both the rear façades should likewise be painted in bright yellow. Note that only the walls should be painted yellow, not the balconies nor the window frames or other projecting architectural elements, which are to be painted white.

Colour on the walls of both front and rear façades:
Bright lemon yellow as shown on attached architectural plan and colour specimen.

Colour of the grid on the front façades:
Black (as black as possible), measurements of the stripes:
500mm, measurements of the yellow "squares": 2300mm x 2300mm.

Note that the "first" vertical stripe to the right of the facade should start at 200mm from the right corner.

Note also that the first bottom stripe should start alike at 200mm from bottom.

Moreover, note that the rear façades between the both buildings should be painted yellow without the grid.

Colour of the rear façades: Same yellow as on the front façades.

Colour of balconies and other projecting elements such as window frames and sides of the balconies: White (without any yellow or grey in the paint, i.e. as bright white as possible).

Inside the balconies:

White except the walls of the "body" of the building and the balcony walls between the apartments. Note also that the underside of the balconies should be painted white.

The "Mickey Mouse" image on the rear facade of building #41:
Dimension of the large circle: diameter 2650mm
Dimensions of the small circles: diameter 1500mm
Colour: black.

Yours sincerely
Ann Edholm

As with the doors at the law courts in Helsingborg and the windows in the atrium at the school in Malmö Ann Edholm let the white balconies cut through the painted surface in sharp-edged sections so that the black and yellow grid, as well as the Mickey Mouse figure, gave the impression of having been projected directly onto the plaster surface before the balconies had been fixed to the building. An incredibly powerful, intensely vibrant image appears out of the hopelessness of the communist heritage at the same time that an archangel, transformed into a comic-strip figure, communicates the promise of a new future.

Journeying Through Space and Thought

If the installations in both Helsingborg and Malmö and the façade in Tirana emphasize the frontal aspect as a sort of essential condition of the room's own lines of movement determined by the visual expression and the experience of the totality of the work through body, gaze and mind, then Ann Edholm's proposal for the commission of the tunnel under Holmsund Road by the newly built travel centre in Umeå had sideways movement and the visually and architectonically metaphorized journey in common with her design of the subway station at Blåsut in Stockholm, a project that was launched some ten years ago but that was only formally inaugurated in the spring of 2009.

The Blåsut proposal took its primary point of departure in the seriously dilapidated subway station itself together with its name and its highly functionalistic idiom as designed by architect Peter Celsing at the beginning of the 1950s as well – of course – as Ann Edholm's own art with its emphasis on questions that are closely linked to both Celsing's conceptual reflections and the abstract, functionalist style that is so close to his own architectural idiom.

With regard to the name of the station, Blåsut, Ann Edholm wanted to focus on the associations that arise in connection with its etymology. This is not an uncommon strategy for an artist who so often links language and its vocabulary so closely to her visual expression and its impact on the viewer; associations that, in the case of Blåsut, primarily deal with breathing out and breathing in, with speed, lightness and dark in collaboration with each other. Blåsut was originally a forester's cottage on the outskirts of the Hammarby estate which later became an abattoir and which is first mentioned in 1768 on what is now the site of Blåsut Road 13 – 19 to the east of the Skärmabrink estate. In the town of Vänersborg there is a district called Blåsut which derives from the fact that working horses would "blow out" when they finally reached the top of the hill. Ann Edholm has also paid particular attention to the movement of the light from the roof down towards the stairs and the entrances. The intention was in no sense to "dress" the walls but, rather, to given the impression of an architectonic and artistic whole in which the spatial aspects and the lighting are emphasized as integral elements of the station.

When it comes to Peter Celsing's architecture Ann Edholm has sought, as far as possible, to preserve the functionalism and the minimalist concept as expressed in both the unique, butterfly-shaped roof over the platform and the ticket hall as well as the glazed parts of the station with their clearly functionalistic iron constructions. The "speed" stripes in the glass and ceramic tiling in the lower part of the station serve the same purpose as well as the aim of emphasizing the station's character of a sort of passage that flows with light and movement and in which, even viewed against the light, it contributes to the artistic whole. The stripes were also intended to be repeated in the wide sidewalls of the stairs, contrasting with the floor and the steps made of black mosaic cement. In the end the artist was obliged to give up this idea for technical and practical reasons but was able, on the other hand, to realize her idea that the "speed" stripes begin their movement on the entrance façade as a sort of sign for wind, for blowing and movement; an invitation to pass through the hall and continue on up to the platforms or, in the reverse direction, down to the entrances on either side of the tracks, like the light and the wind.

The "face", the abstract composition in black and orange involving the door to the bomb shelter opposite the main stairs is based on the same Wide-Open-Shut that was also the basis

of the sirens on Gärdet, a title that corresponds very well with the subway station and its specific architectonic expression in which the composition with the orange-coloured eyes and the mouth which is the transformed black door to the shelter instantly captures the gaze from the upper section of the stairs at the same time that the composition can lead one's thoughts to a face that stares back at the traveller on her way down and out of the station along the speed stripes. The composition can also be experienced as a sort of eye of the wind, a stop for gazes that cross each other and for movements in the room.

Peter Celsing's butterfly-shaped roof, which seems almost to hover above the platform and ticket hall, is among the most beautiful architectonic entities in Stockholm with both aesthetic and functionalist significance for the entire design of the station in accordance with the ideological consideration that was current after the war when Celsing made his design contribution to the many subway stations of the southern suburbs that were originally cast in concrete with delicate, light constructions using iron, wood, glass and various board materials. In her written proposal from 2005 Ann Edholm accordingly suggested that a raised butterfly-shaped glass roof should be built over the actual station building as an extension of Celsing's wooden roof, a proposal that was in strict agreement with Celsing's reference to Mies van der Rohe's functionalist idiom. The idea was that whereas the light, during the dark periods of the day, is directed downwards onto the platform from Celsing's roof, it should instead be directed upwards through the glass roof, whereupon the entire roof construction would have a dark side and a light side. However, this part of the proposal was never realized. Also part of the original proposal was that the design would gain further support and weight if the ceiling above the ticket hall was painted white and if a large number of light sources were set into the ceiling. The meeting between Celsing's roof and the new glass roof was intended to emphasize the confrontation between light and dark, a central reference point for Ann Edholm. "In this way a mood of shimmering air would be created in the evenings", she proposed, as the light from above during the day and even the white floor and the white ramp leading to the lift, only to be replaced by the black section of stairs leading down to the entrance and the "face" in a movement running from light to darkness. Here even the indirect lighting illuminates the speed stripes to give an impression of moving light inside the relatively dark part of the station up towards the bright roof section. The original proposal for the design of the roof also supported the idea that the ramp leading to the lift so to speak hovers in the room filled with light and air in which the horizontal iron beams reinforce the movement upwards towards the light.

As with all her public commissions the proposal for the travel centre in Umeå was also based on those visual and conceptual elements that are essential in Ann Edholm's oeuvre, elements that link up with concepts such as movement and speed, monumentality and geometrical contrasts rooted in both physical and ideational experiences of finding oneself in a concrete space and, at the same time, if the expression is permitted, in a purely intellectual experience. Thanks to her emphasis on the immediately experienced impression of movement in the physical body, the proposal – which was given the title Forth-Back – emphasizes in particular the experience of finding oneself in a state of movement, of being on a journey, of moving forth and of returning, forth and back. This is an impression that the proposal underlined by the fact that the movement brought about by the black and orange-coloured wedges is turned in the light-well in the middle of the wall, measuring some 30 metres in length and more than three metres high, in the tunnel under Holmsund Road and by the fact that people on their way through the tunnel, precisely at this moment of extra light, can turn back along the wedge-shaped speed stripes, for example, or can continue along the orange wedges.

Thus Forth-Back divided the long wall into two halves in accordance with the existing architecture by making use of this division to further strengthen both the experiential and the conceptual experience of the work. As regards the tunnel, there is a similar experience to that of the child counting its steps in tens instead of in hundreds, one, two, three, four, then suddenly ten and soon one hundred. As in Edholm's other installations the physical movement is guided and reinforced by the conceptual movement of our own thoughts, memories, associations: we move in space, we are on a journey, we are on our way to somewhere, perhaps on our way back. The design also underlines this through the way that the tunnel connects with the station building as the venue both for the start of a journey and its potential goal, the "stationary" conditions for the journey forth and back.

The body's active cooperation was the first condition of the work, its phenomenological certificate of baptism in the sense of it being the physical movement that gives the visual configuration its meaning and significance in more or less the same way as when the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty himself explains that the perception of reality and its existential habitat are always rooted in the bodily experience, in the flesh "carrying" our "being-in-the-world". The painters, according to Merleau-Ponty, paint the world in the way that he or she experiences it on his or her own body; for the painter the world is woven from objects, events and perceptual forms that, with his or her own body, he or she feels part of and whose structures his or her images portray.

It is no accident either that Forth-Back was intended to meet the passing traveller in the form of little tiny, black and brilliant orange Venetian mosaics with associations not only to Byzantine churches in which the light shimmers and is reflected by little pieces of mosaic, often placed at an angle, of the same sort used in Umeå as well as, according to the artist, associations to the black gondola that glides proudly past a vaporetto station somewhere on the Canale Grande, the "motorway" of this city on the water at which most people arrive via the Stazione Santa Lucia where the city is anchored to dry land. The shining, glittering, magically gleaming effect leads one's thoughts to "exotic" destinations far, far away or very, very close.

The immediate model, and the one closest in time to this extraordinarily beautiful and visually striking design in Umeå was the painting Kaddish shown at Galerie Nordenhake in Stockholm in the autumn of 2008. Another variant, painted on aluminium, was shown at Galerie Nordenhake in Berlin during the spring of 2009. The title is that of the famous Jewish mourning prayer with its repeated words and phrases recited with ever-greater intensity, just like the speed stripes in the passage under Holmsund Road. In this context we may remind ourselves that "kaddish", which derives etymologically from the Arameic word "quaddis" meaning "holy", is not just the prayer of the mourner but is also a doxology recited at fixed points in the synagogue liturgy praising God's sanctity.

Indeed, faced here with one of Ann Edholm's most important paintings one is reminded of the words that the Nobel laureate Imre Kertész used to conclude the ancient lament for the dead which, for Kertész, is one long, intense, calling, joking, weeping, babbling no to an unborn child, a no that overflows with pain following the experience of Auschwitz:

Beneath my feet the gutter seethes as though the filthy stream of my memories wanted to overflow its secret channel in order to pull me into it. Let this happen; I am prepared. With a final vast effort I have, once more, shown to the world my fragile but persistent existence – I have displayed it so that then, with the bundle of my life in my upstretched hands, I may enter my journey and, as in a dark river's strident black waters,

may sink to the bottom,

O Lord!

Let me sink to the bottom

eternally.

Amen.

In a sense Ann Edholm, moreover, completed a circle under Holmsund Road not just through the metaphorical references to travel and to passages, the same references that can be found in Transire, in Sirens and at the Blåsut subway station, but perhaps especially as another extremely important point of connection in her art to be found in the same city as Forth-Back, namely Tango d'amour in the Institute of Education in Umeå: five paintings that, just like Forth-Back, interact with the architecture at the same time that the conceptual experience and the compositional elements strengthen and emphasize the presence of the human body within the physical space. If Tango d'amour is as much a dance as a movement, a dancing movement that brings visibility to the meeting places of the architecture in a defined space that appears both as a sort of passage and as a place for contemplation, then Forth-Back aimed at giving rise to similar physical associations of movement and speed as well as pause-like, motionless points, the venue for the beginning of the journey as well as for its final destination.

Another project that, however, inexplicably failed to be realized, yet perhaps on that account proved to be the given and, in many respects, self-evident starting point for the large painting at Moderna Museet entitled Übergang, was not just Kaddish, but the proposal that Ann Edholm was asked to provide for the “decoration” of the Ryd school in Linköping in the spring of 2010. This proposal was called Selene, the Greek name for the moon goddess who often appears in Greek mythology along side Helios, the sun god. If the etymological origin of the name really is “selas” (σέλας), meaning “clarity”, the proposal represented both clarity with regard to knowledge and the school's overall task of fostering sharp and independent thinkers, the proposal thus including both globe-shaped lamps of the sort that are found in older school buildings and a mural with black and orange wedges facing each other. The painting could, according to the proposal, thus be understood as a sort of emblem for sharp arguments in opposition to each other in front of which the “moon” shines with its clarity and its promise of knowledge and understanding. In other words, Selene was a proposal that presupposed a carefully considered architectonic and artistic collaboration between the necessary number of globe-shaped lamps and the mural, in which the lamps were to be hung by black cables and with black fixtures, where the black would correspond to the black of the painting. It was also intended that the light should be as white as possible and that the lamps should be hung in direct relation to the painting and should have a diameter of 50 – 70 centimetres. The height would, of course, be adjusted to fit in with the overall impression of the place.

Selene related directly also to another school project (the Värnhem school) as well as to the law courts in Helsingborg and can, of course, be seen as a logical link with Ann Edholm's art in general, not least as displayed at the kunsthalle Passagen in Linköping in the spring of 2007. This was an exhibition about which the local newspaper wrote that her paintings never leave one unmoved: “With a high level of craft skill and a desire to get to the bottom of her ideas she takes a position among the most exciting and creative artists of today”. And the museum's press release claimed that “there is thus a natural gravitas and a profound seriousness to her work that never flirts with cheap effects or ingratiating allegories. She converses with artists from other epochs, finding nutrition and ideas among them”. She had intended this conversation to continue in the cafeteria at the Ryd school together with teachers and their pupils, a discussion which, as said before, unfortunately will never take place.

The painting Übergang is the same size as one of the end walls in Ann Edholm's studio in Lid just outside Nyköping south of Stockholm, according to critic Magnus Bons, though it was not tied to that specific space, yet in relation to the recognition of the “dual spatial direction” on account of, while shown at Moderna Museet, being referred back to the absent room, that is to say the studio in Lid and to its hanging at the museum. Magnus Bons also asks what this recognition means as one views the painting and, at the same time, he suggests that its meaningful “punctum” cannot be anywhere else but in the paint itself as physical medium, in how the physical body of the paint stretches over the entire canvas and how the orange-coloured “knitting needles” direct their sharp points at the soft, bottomless darkness between them.

If it is true that Ann Edholm, as mentioned before, through her corporeally perceptible handling of paint with a rubber squeegee and a sponge unites “calls of the flesh” with the distancing effect of language, then it would be almost criminal not to associate the work once again with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his ideas about existential phenomenology and the object – the painting – as a special form of appeal; an act of speech to listen to, a text to read, to unite with the bodily perception. For Merleau-Ponty is not just explicit but repeatedly extra careful in pointing out that we perceive and see the world precisely with and through our bodies. We are in the world through our bodyliness, as he puts it, we are introduced into the world through our corporality by means of which we perceive the things around us. Seeing is, to a high degree, a pleasurable physical act that engages bodily fluids and is therefore influenced by our bodily being-in-the-world at the same time that language – all those linguistic signs, designations and reflections – places us at a distance in relation to our own preconditions of being “in the flesh”. Here Ann Edholm's art takes

a bearing between proximity and distance, between wet paint, thumbprints, gliding tracks, smearing actions and “desiccated” language.

The Grand Commission

As the title suggests, the proposal for a curtain for the ECOSOC session chamber at the UN headquarters in New York in the spring of 2010 seeks to establish and promote an artistic discourse characterized by principles of equality between the various parties involved, primarily with the city of New York with its familiar and often graphic silhouette, the East River outside the panoramic windows of the session chamber and, not least, the city’s special, silvery light that is intended to pour in during the day through the white wedges of the curtain, as well as the architect, Sven Markelius’s architectonic vision based on the fundamentals of functionalism, with a particular emphasis on his treatment of the area of the chamber closest to the window, that is to say the delegates’ area with the horseshoe-shaped tables in relation to the other parts of the chamber, not least the roof construction with its beams, ventilation ducts and other functional details as parts of a large, abstract composition, with Marianne Richter’s original curtain from 1952 with its butterfly-shaped compositional elements and, not least, the delegates and the general public; in short, all of the people who use the chamber and who, thanks to the monumental impact of the curtain and its precise character of decisiveness and strength is expected to experience the significance of the democratic discourse and the historic importance of the decisions that are made in the chamber. The proposal, which was given the Greek title **διάλογος** (dialogue) naturally relates itself to an artist’s oeuvre that has been characterized precisely as “grand” on the edge of sublime in dialogue with, for example Barnett Newman who was at the peak of his art at precisely the time when the chamber was built and when Sven Markelius was commissioned to design the interior; and likewise in dialogue with Kazimir Malevich and Caspar David Friedrich.

Conceptually **διάλογος** seeks its point of departure in the notion that the first democratic discourse took place at the Agora during Greek antiquity between free citizens as a reminder of the significance of mutual exchange of views on equal terms, something that also characterizes the UN charter and that, at each meeting, is also embodied in the deliberations that take place at a global level within the ECOSOC chamber. Moreover, the title given to the new curtain reminds one of the etymology of the notion with the combination of the Greek prefix **διά** and the word **λόγος** (logos) which was used by Plato and Aristotle to describe human reasoning and our knowledge of the world and of ourselves. The dictionary is emphatic on this point: the word “dialogue” originally

meant “by means of conversation”. This is a notion that was also employed metaphorically in the proposal for the curtain as a mutual conversation between the equal black and white wedges which, in turn, lead to “sharp” decisions and resolutions; just as sharp as the points of the wedges in the graphic composition.

Διάλογος builds on the idea of the possibility of dialogue between the outer room and the architectural interior as it was once created by both the principal architect for the complex, Wallace Harrison, and Sven Markelius, who designed the interior, in which the large, panorama window open onto the East River as well as the buildings opposite. The special light of New York City was also a source of inspiration, the light referred to by artist Brice Marden when, in 1980, he explained that his paintings should be experienced as both hot and cold at the same time:

By cold I mean as in hot and cold. I mean, now in this light it looks cold, in this daylight – famous silvery New York daylight, on the Bowery.

The glittering East River, the intense white light and the silhouette of the skyscrapers opposite all converse with the session chamber through the huge window which is pierced by contrasting window-bars. Subdued by the white backing of the curtain this light is intended to flow into the chamber through the white wedges reinforced, as required, by a bank of floodlights mounted between the curtain and the backing producing light that is as white as possible. The sense of transparency is one of the most important aspects of the design, together with the razor-sharp graphic precision and the dense blackness of the black wedges. The floodlights are also intended to remove the possibility of silhouettes being visible from outside and this meets the most pressing demand for security on the part of the curtain. It is intended to realize the same effect with the corresponding white light from the “white cloud”, that is Sven Markelius’s suspended ceiling above the delegates’ seating. The idea is that the lighting should correspond to natural daylight as far as possible.

As mentioned, thus **διάλογος** establishes and sustains a very special artistic dialogue with Sven Markelius’s distinct architecture with its functionalist foundation not only through the white and black wedge shapes that are vaguely reminiscent of 1950s Swedish modernism, but also on account of the curtain’s “rational” design and, not least, through its graphic simplicity which creates a sense of monumentality in relation to the scale of the interior. The effect is nothing less than a determined, cogent and convincing discourse between an architecture that is as proud as it is modern, and a curtain that has been designed expressly to stimulate

such a discourse with the help of unequivocal artistic arguments based on the idea that the decisions that are made in the session chamber are understood as realized visions “with their feet firmly on the ground” and their gaze directed towards the light. Much as Plato when he wrote his dialogues with Socrates, a particular relation to both tradition and the here-and-now is created simultaneously both here and now.

The monumental impact of the curtain and the contrast between the intensely white wedges and the equally intensive black ones, where the density of the blackness is achieved through the light-absorbing felt fabric, is intended, in accordance with Markelius's original ideas, to establish the delegates' workplace as a partially enclosed interior with a very special character, yet for it to remain in dialogue with the session chamber in general. Here the ceiling surfaces in black and white form important compositional elements, working together with the ventilation ducts and other technical services, as also the curtain's “functionalistic” design as a species of homage to one of the leading architects of the epoch-making Stockholm Exhibition of 1930. In order to re-establish the functionalist simplicity of the chamber it was proposed that the large podium in the fond should be removed in favour of tables reminiscent of the original uniform, horseshoe-shaped table.

If διάλογος was conceived as homage to Sven Markelius and Swedish functionalism as well, not least, as a reference to the dialogue character of the democratic discourse, then, indeed, it should also be seen as homage to Marianne Richter, the textile artist who was commissioned to create the original curtain for the ECOSOC session chamber at the beginning of the 1950s. It is no coincidence that the wedge shapes in the proposal refer indirectly to the “butterflies” that were created on the original curtain using wedge shapes which were a characteristic visual element in Swedish modernism at that time. “As a manifestation of Swedish textile art the woven curtain is memorable”, was the newspaper Dagens Nyheter's comment when Marianne Richter's curtain was shown at the National Museum in Stockholm prior to being freighted over to New York. The paper added: “And it is precisely the absence of a narrative subject that gives the work its calm dignity, a stability and gravitas that must be a major asset in such a consciously architectural space as Markelius's session chamber would seem to be”. In other words, Ann Edholm's proposal for a new curtain builds on the insight that the inheritance from both Sven Markelius and Marianne Richter is a binding obligation for contemporary Swedish art.

Διάλογος, according to the proposal, was intended to be made by textile-craft organization Handarbetets Vänner in Stockholm as three lengths of curtain. Dividing the curtain into three

lengths was necessary for reasons of safety, for opening the curtain and for emptying the building. The wide middle section was to be as uniform and as tightly stretched as possible at the same time that the white wedges create the effect of painting in opposition to the black wedges. At this point the curtain enters into discourse with important parts of Edholm's art in which the specific character of painting is an absolutely essential element.

Thus, in this paradoxical space, Ann Edholm's love tango lives its own special life: Medusa who dances on the island of death with Mickey Mouse, Sven Markelius and Marianne Richter...

And Death...

When Magnus Bons wanted to describe the large painting at Moderna Museet he could not avoid the word “knitting needle” in relation to the orange or black wedge-shaped elements pointing towards the black centre of the painting, the “bottomless darkness” between the wedges. In his choice of word he can hardly have been unaware of the link with how the artist herself has allowed the suite of engravings entitled Morituri te salutant from spring 2010 to be described in direct and immediate proximity to her “mentor” Paul Osipow and to Joseph Conrad's novel Heart of Darkness, one of Ann Edholm's most important sources of inspiration to which she inevitably returns time after time in a sort of intellectual and experiential cycle that would seem to lack any counterpart in contemporary Swedish art if we except her colleague Jan Häfström and his obsession with similar themes: alienation, blackness and death.

We see an elderly man with a lined face, half bald but still remarkably wiry if not muscular. It is surely the Finnish painter Paul Osipow himself sitting at the table and drawing a skull, this classical “vanitas” symbol described in the introductory words to the Book of Ecclesiastes in St. Jerome's Latin translation: “Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas”. He draws and draws and draws, fixing this all too human fate onto the paper. As with all his predecessors in the grand tradition he simultaneously inspects his furrowed face in the mirror before him, staring with his dark beady eyes over the frame of his glasses.

Ever since first lecturing at what is now the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm in the early 1980s, Paul Osipow has acted as a strangely familiar reference for Ann Edholm, though distant with regard to time and space. At times he has been a harsh guide and at other times a tender one; the wise old man with the secret that slowly reveals itself in the artistic dialogue, is transformed, remodelled and then finds its way in a penetrating movement in towards what we can really never understand. This would seem to be precisely the movement that, as both the old man drawing the skull and his companion know, fills the emptiness with the insight

of this incomprehensible saturation. But the pictures do not seem melancholic at all in the classical sense of being filled with black bile or sublime gloom. Rather, they appear as having been gently caressed into existence; appear even as slightly humorous reminders of what we would really like to forget. And it is hardly a surprise that the description can be applied to both of them, to Paul Osipow and to Ann Edholm.

On the draughtsman's table the skull with its empty black sockets may find itself in the company of anything from a knife and fork, as though the meal was at an end, to a jar of brushes and pencils, a penknife and, not least, a so-called Viborg pretzel which must be a subtle reference to the artist's Russian father who died several decades ago; and all this finds itself, in turn, in the company of Ann Edholm's black knitter, those razor-sharp, intensely black and orange-coloured wedges, this face-to-face with the shining white eyes like holes from nails or spears. Indeed, the nails and spears must, in turn, be the needles that Joseph Conrad's two women, at the very start of Heart of Darkness, use to knit their black wool in the recruiting office in the city that Philip Marlowe associates with a whitened tomb. With her silver-framed glasses on the tip of her nose the older woman, in particular, has something frightening and fateful about her as she briefly but intently measures Marlowe with a look filled with an impassive and scary omniscience. It is precisely as though she already knows everything about him and the fate in store for him; she who guards the door to darkness while knitting her yarn as though for a warm pall.

"Ave! Old knitter of black wool", Marlowe exclaims adding the doom-laden "Morituri te salutant", reputedly the Roman gladiator's salute to the emperor: "Those who are about to die salute you".