

Published in Catalogue, Plateau of Mankind, 49 Biennale di Venezia, catalogue 1.

Published: 2001 by la Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy; ISBN 88-435-9607-1
– by Sara Arrhenius

A raging fire blazes forth through a long corridor as several cripples hobble in panic in a futile attempt to escape the flames. Every time the fire consumes a cripple, a round of applause is heard. Athletic men, perched on trapezes, swing in succession into a vast emptiness. Their bodies are crushed against a high tower the dock tower of the Berlin Olympic Stadium of 1936 and fall in pieces onto an examination table in an anatomical theatre. Magnus Wallin's computer animated video works, although possessing an aesthetics akin to that of computer games, are primarily stories about the human body. Or rather, stories concerning the manner in which the human body is portrayed and understood in contemporary western society. The short, animated sequences strike the viewer, with their intensity and subjective camera, and stage a series of events juxtaposing two body types. On the one hand: the perfect athletic bodies that submissively cast themselves into the void in *Skyline*, like cattle on their way to the slaughterhouse.

The bodies that form perfect, symmetrical circles, like the decorative swimmers in *Limbo*, where each individual, as an exchangeable cog, constitutes a small part of a larger mechanism. It is the heroised body of the monumental aesthetics we see here, a symmetrical machine of pure muscle. We honour this body unconditionally in advertising and fashion, and enjoy watching it perform in our modern day equivalent to the gladiator games in sports arenas, or in game shows on television. On the other hand: the hobbling wretches desperately trying to save themselves from the firestorm in *Exit*. These cripples represent the body that everyone chooses to turn a blind eye to, and that no one need be cursed with, as long as an effort is made to exercise, eat right, and undergo plastic surgery! A malformed exclamation mark, a grotesque deformity that reminds us of our pain and shortcomings; the body that we feel compelled to hide, correct, adjust and discipline.

Upon viewing Magnus Wallin's four video works, *Exit*, *Limbo*, *Physical Paradise* and *Skyline* together, the consistency of his work becomes apparent. A critical analysis is brought to bear, focusing on how these concepts of the human body are intimately intertwined with key aspects of our culture. We tend to categorise bodies in terms of good and evil, beautiful and ugly, useful and useless. These nations are, in turn, based on the belief that symmetry, clean lines and surfaces, and perfect bodies reflect a divine harmony, as opposed to how bodies that violate these ideals instil horror. Wallin makes us aware of how the human body has, since the first dissections in the anatomical theatres of the Renaissance, steadily become more fragmentised, to the point where it is now presented as a machine – a system of information or codes, the parts of which can easily be improved or replaced. We have adopted an increasingly relentless attitude towards bodies that deviate, function poorly, or simply fail to fulfil the current criteria for beauty.

There is logic to the choice of working with three dimensional animations in video, a medium normally associated with computer games and the entertainment industry. The world Magnus Wallin creates in his works makes no claims on realism or reality. Instead, his interest lies in how we create concepts and ideologies through the use of images. Hieronymus Bosch, pictorial quotations of Leni Riefenstahl's films, and psychedelic visions of paradise, reminiscent of new age imagery, appear side by side. Wallin does not categorise these various pictorial elements, nor does he grade them. They all play a part in our visual culture, and express how we view humanity. Through this cannibalistic borrowing of imagery, Magnus Wallin demonstrates how certain age-old notions of man

and the human body still prevail in contemporary iconography, and continue to convey a strong ideology. The use of video animation is not simply a choice of medium, but also a method of examining and commenting on the manner in which this medium is applied in our culture. When one chooses to work with video, as opposed to techniques exclusively identified with high culture, such as painting, one chooses a medium that is used in society at large, charged with aspects of the times and the fantasies therein. In Wallin's work, we find no trace of the media-critical distance and the visualisation of the conditions of the medium, a normal strategy among artists working with new media. Instead, Wallin consciously takes advantage of the visual force inherent in the imagery of popular culture as a means of sending out a message, and readily makes use of a strong rhetoric to captivate his viewer.

Sara Arrhenius © 2001. All rights reserved.