

Annika Nordin

## A Meeting With Human Dimensions

–The painting should be experienced like meeting a person; navel to navel, Ann Edholm explains as she stands a pace or two in front of one of her large works. It should be equally direct, equally physical.

–At this point you are in the painting itself, she continues. Then she takes a couple of steps backwards and explains that it is at this point that the painting starts to become an image. She moves backwards and forwards among the large paintings. Just as she wants people to do when they come to look at them. Movement is implicit in Ann Edholm's work; our perception and the surface of the canvas shift and are altered. I myself is sitting statically on a chair in her studio, surrounded by four paintings inspired by a visit during the preceding summer to the countryside outside Vishny-Volochok in Russia.

Veronica's cloth – the sudarium – can well symbolize Ann Edholm's paintings. For the narrative of her own life has left its equally strong impression on the canvases. A process of human genesis. Stamped with the irrepressibility of seeing what is not given. And of investigating what it is possible to portray in paint. Ann Edholm's work provides us with a contemporary report about a highly original woman artist. And about an uncompromising will to determine and keep to a course entirely of her own through a veritable archipelago of isms and faded vision.

She has termed painting "a wonderful truth". There are other truths. But this is Ann Edholm's essential truth. This has been the case for 25 years and the result has been some ten major works each year.

–The size of the paintings is always close to the measurements of my own body, she explains as she stretches out her arms.

Ann Edholm's paintings offer us a meeting with human dimensions. This is at a time when communication is understood as electronics and speed. A unique and deeply personal meeting between an I and Thou, the canvas, offer. A contemplative encounter in which time is built into the physical paint and in which the space of the image may well open towards an infinity.

–The surface of the canvas should be inclusive like a skin, Ann Edholm explains. In order to achieve this somewhat subdued surface she uses a smooth cotton canvas. She paints with a rubber scraper, a palette knife or a sponge. She avoids using brushes in order not to create a text that the eye merely reads through. Oil paints give her the right weight and the requisite slow tempus. She mixes her own paints from pigments and wax in order to achieve the exact, matt sensation and intensity that she wants. Light and mood are of greater significance than colour. She applies layer upon layer of thin paint, creating a lighted space from pigment and wax. A coloured body veined by time. A body encased by a surface that is like a membrane, like skin. The skin self embraces and opens the way for the narrative, protecting the unprotected and holding the picture. In this way a meeting place is created in which the eye can roam and thoughts can travel.

– The space is created in the paint itself, Ann Edholm elucidates. It is a matter of the right density and mass. Tiny movements that are not visible but that exist. The work is not finished until I have achieved this level of concentration, this charge.

A room for thinking is what she calls this vibrating space made of paint, something that is highly characteristic of her work up until the beginning of the 1990s. But the paint space has also been filled with other meanings. For Ann Edholm it is really always a matter of spatiality. She constantly takes the architecture of the gallery as her starting point, relating her works to this architecture and adapting how the paintings are hung accordingly. The installation Huldra from 1990 was the first occasion on which she made active use of the space as such. The columns of the gallery served as trees. They cast their shadows, thus emphasizing the elusiveness of the sylvan temptress.

The works are, as she says, “things of paint” or flat sculptures. They are three-dimensional objects, bodies in a room. The image is precisely and physically on the canvas. The edge of the stretcher is not really the pictorial surface that we confront. Painting on the edge of the stretcher has been Ann Edholm’s way of describing a facticity. This is painted. But more and more it has become a matter of an image within an image. And words and communicative ideas begin to sneak about.

Underlying Ann Edholm’s mode of painting is the landscape and an image that has been painted over. Up until the beginning of the 1980s she painted only landscapes; realistic in the day and abstract at night. But she abandoned landscapes in spite of an intensive relationship with them. “They led only to isms.” She wanted to speak of human and existential dimensions, though not in figurative terms. She painted over. But she let the traces at the edges of the pictures that she painted over remain as a sort of pictorial murmuring, as in Untitled (1985).

–I started painting surfaces that communicated my feelings.

I painted numerous works that included large, dark blocks. I appear in the picture myself as a little pink stick, she explains, illustrating with a sketch from 1977.

–You are about to be crushed, I exclaim.

–Yes indeed, is her calm reply. They were little existential tales. These black blocks, she says as she points to the sketch, they are now in the room. Instead of making a picture, the image is in the room. The series entitled Vishny-Volochok (2003) is not more abstract than the sketch. It is just that now I am standing in the room. There is no figurative drama.

–I am regarded as working in a male tradition of abstract expressionism, Ann Edholm continues. Painting in a large format is masculine. Including the room is masculine. These are just clichés. Few people observe that my pictures have content. And that the content is that of a woman.

Her paintings are a play on the norm of masculinity in concrete, constructivist and minimalist art.

–I don’t devote myself to pure, high-minded painting. I tell a story. A painting may look very minimalist. But I bend a line, rub out the edges a little so that the painting does not seem static. And when I give it the title Door, the entire masculine perception is brought tumbling down.

Ann Edholm’s imagery is figurative. She deals with ambivalence, double vision and paradox. This applies both to form and to colour. Her gaze is in the gap between the expected and the unexpected. Between the almost sacred and the profane. Between the elevated and the worldly. And so, in works like Inuk (1991), Pietà (1994) and Grave-like (1998 – 1999), she creates a meeting that makes everything “beautiful in a sublime manner”.

But Ann Edholm’s “impure” art can also be used to give legitimacy in the art arena to not accepting her work or in rendering it invisible. The male norms of purity and collegiality have been quick to define her in terms so as to exclude her as being too feminine. And she has been criticized by the very young women artists for producing “masculine, heroic paintings”.

Thus can a woman artist dedicated to prizing open our gaze and expanding our vision – “skinning our gaze” is the term Ann Edholm uses – be successfully pushed into a blind corner of the Swedish art scene.

Watching – the empty gaze that sees nothing – and the force of words are something that Ann Edholm constantly illuminates and refines in her art. The unequivocal word, the word that can bore into the soul, the word that can burn holes. What does she herself then hide behind the notion of “the word as a sharp point pressed against the eye”?

–Words and vision are connected, she answers.

–Are not images and vision related then? I wonder.

–No, just think if they are not related, she answers in a

surprised voice and continues: Just think if this has a great deal to do with bodily feeling and bodily memories. Perhaps that is why I regard painting as sculpture. The image is not connected with the gaze, the watching, but with actually seeing. And seeing is something one does with one's body.

In Ann Edholm's universe we meet face to face. And we see navel to navel. Eye of the body to eye of the body.

Ann Edholm likes movement, likes working purely physically. But she laconically remarks: Stretching all these canvases and then painting them is quite a big task. Her art seems to spring from bodily activity, from an "I was always busy drawing, doing puzzles..." This, paired with a childhood which was very different from what we are used to today. Up until the age of seven when her younger sister was born, Ann Edholm lived with four adults, her father and mother and her paternal grandparents, in a large house by the water with a lovely garden and a grotto that her grandfather had constructed. Her grandmother introduced her to the non-visible world of beings, pixies and ghosts. Her grandfather's house was sold and most of the rooms were refurbished and altered. The large fir tree blew down. But her grandmother's room remained. Her grandfather was an engineer, an inventor and an amateur artist who taught her how to draw perspective. At her first exhibition he sat holding his walking stick and pointing to the paintings, exclaiming: "No, that's not really right".

In her grandfather's house there were "many openings, very strange sorts of vacant spaces that had been left over when the house was rebuilt". She carries the house with her, feels the scale of it in her body. The distance between "the light switch and the edge of the door". She continues to dream about the strange spaces.

-At important moments in my life I have a recurring dream. It is about two holes. Two openings, I have to choose the right one if I am to be able to get out.

It has taken her a long time to find the right path in painting, and to find her own means of expression. She gained admission to her first art college on account of her "monumentality". In 1981 she was accepted as a student at what is now the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm and she also started working as a junior deckhand – one of the first women so employed – on a ferry in the Stockholm archipelago. She hammered rust, threw mooring ropes and steered the ship. In this way she managed to finance her studies for a decade and was promoted from deckhand to seaman.

-I was very expert at throwing the heavy ropes and getting them to land on the bollards, she remembers with a sense of satisfaction.

Her painting did not really take off until she went to New York

in 1984. The narrative of how she found freedom of movement and recognized her own mode of expression is also deeply rooted in bodily vision.

-I suddenly found that I had a small, extremely dark space here, she explains, drawing a small square at heart level. I could go in and out through a little door. I could move freely. I could shut the door and get on with my work. I could open it and meet with people. Could be myself. This state of being I have always experienced as a small, dark interior room. A living darkness in the midst of life. This is the narrative of paintings like My Darkness (2003).

Ann Edholm's encounter with Barnett Newman's work had a decisive effect on her art.

-He made me feel proud of being me, she explains. This is a feeling that has lasted. Faced with Barnett Newman's paintings I felt extremely present. His works are full of the spirit of daring to take up space. Of things being possible!

Today she can see a restlessness in his work that is not her own. Ann Edholm is often linked with Mark Rothko.

But with Rothko, she explains, it is the same as with Matisse. They are just too beautiful. She admires, and she can feel a certain affinity with Rothko's paintings at the Tate Gallery in London. The paint is thickly applied; time and mass can be felt. But the differences are all the greater. Mark Rothko is "sad and quieter".

Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois are Ann Edholm's female models. Both of them were recognized late in their lives. Louise Bourgeois won world fame not until 70. Their narratives of what it means to be a woman and an artist were something that Edholm recognized. Their discourse on the organic and bodily experience was confirmation. For her own sake she can still make little sculptures à la Hesse.

Ann Edholm now lives in another old house, a former school within spitting distance of a church decorated in his youth by the famous mediaeval mural-painter Albertus Pictor. She enjoys the context, the proximity to the grand narrative that has characterized our culture. And regardless of who may be listening, we sit within the painted walls and discuss what cannot be fathomed and what exists but is not always visible. For Ann Edholm's ideas about transcendence and the possibility of achieving in painting a concentration that is like a presence has give rise to violent reactions and fierce criticism.

But for Ann Edholm it is not a question of Hilma af Klint's spiritism. Nor of Malevich's suprematism. Nor of cosmology or new age. And she is neither religious in a traditional sense nor does she rely on mystics. But she says: "Call it mysticism if you like, but in the sense that there is much that we know nothing about." The transcendence that Ann Edholm talks about is based on her own experiences. She explains that she "comes from the

landscape and its immenseness". She likens her basic approach to a simply portrayed scene in the film version of Alex Haley's novel Roots.

The freed slave holds up his newborn child in the face of nature and infinity. And he exclaims that it is only this that is greater than the child itself.

–I have never claimed that there is transcendence in painting. But my attitude to life is such that I carry on painting until just such a level of concentration arises. But I do not compare my paintings with icons and maintain that the transcendence is actually here", she explains, pointing at the surface of the painting. That there is a membrane here and that, behind the membrane, there is something else.

–What is it that you say, then?

–That the picture is a paradox. It is filled with something. Perhaps this something is just a nothing. The uncertainty is tempting.

A painter of wounds, is an epithet that has been used about Ann Edholm. The term is not her own. But towards the middle of the 1980s she started to manipulate various openings on her canvases. From running over an unresponsive surface in the intimation of an opening, of something that stares back, a cavity, to a smeary wound. The first such work was Inj (1986). Gradually she made holes in the surface using turpentine, actual, concrete wounds in the painted surface. In the first work, Eye (1987), there was just one opening; something looking out. In the series of Huldra (1990) paintings there was a smeary red verticality that reinforced the perception of a cavernous wound.

In 1991 she painted Inuk which was to be her last wound painting. This work can symbolize all of the wound paintings. She thought about calling it Icon but chose Inuk. The word comes from Greenland and it means "to be a human person". On a cold, turquoise surface there is a red incision. Like dried blood. Inuk is the wound and the female sexual organ.

But Ann Edholm would never have dared to paint her Pietà (1994) had it not been for Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois. There is a double vision to the painting: a meeting between the sacred and the earthbound. On the cool, white surface a rust-coloured, pus-filled cavity.

–I have painted the anus which is night, is death. When we die, when life releases its grip on us then: psssch. She lets the air escaped through her pursed lips. Here lies the falling sensation of the moment of death. The soul has gone. Only the white flesh of a person remains. But there is a glow to the whiteness that elevates it. And the rust coloured area is similar in shape to the bearded old men found in icons.

–I have not painted the image of a wound, she continues. The wound has been hollowed out of the paint. It is a body with a hole in. But it is a painting. Louise Bourgeois patiently hacked out eyes

and chiselled out the wounds of life in granite, marble and other materials. 'She sculpted life' might stand as a motto for Louise Bourgeois. But it is true of Ann Edholm too.

"The wound becomes a song", the Danish writer Suzanne Brøgger wrote as she concluded the novel about her own family drama. Ann Edholm has worked through the tears, left the wounds in her melancholy and time-consuming act of painting. The path leading away from the wound has passed over cavities and words.

Two paintings support this transition. Then (1991), was inspired by the bullet-pierced cranium of the Swedish monarch Charles XII (1682 – 1718). The hole left by the bullet just as round and precise as is finding the right word: the word that can "burn a hole in the head". In The Blue Painting (1994), a round red form rests on a blue surface. The red area is a little ragged round the edges as "when a child first applies lipstick to its mouth". The picture is abstract and the ragged edges are a farewell to the wound. The circular shape opens to release it, to let it out.

The painting Fractured Surface (Word cavity) (1996) marks the entrance of the new and more graphic style of painting that Ann Edholm has embraced since the mid 1990s. Simple forms with circles and squares dominate her surfaces. Darkness and light are now more equal. There is something reminiscent of children's drawings about her canvases. Eye, eye, nose mouth. The houses have faces. The footprints have paws. Suddenly Mickey Mouse looks out of a frame of the same dimensions as Zurbarán's painting of the vernicle. The works can relate to non-vision, to empty seeing. But also to the power of words. A word can push Mickey Mouse through the wall, leaving an exact impression – a word cavity.

Ann Edholm says that she found a new linguistic element in her more graphic images. Colour became more important. The concentration remains but the charge is less intense. Small shifts in the painting could provide infinite variations and comments on the real world.

–When one breaks a stone in half one ends up with a fracture that is very empty. A new-born surface that needs to be filled. The front of a face that one has to get to know. That is how I have regarded many of these paintings, Ann Edholm explains, looking at me as we sit in her studio. Perhaps this is her own new face.

–But, she continues, as yet there is too little body and too many signs. I don't want to remain here.

In her 14 Conceptions – Tango d'amour (1998) Ann Edholm portrays the Via Dolorosa, Jesus' progress to Golgotha. Throughout her artistic career there has been an underlying, pulsating female passion story. A similarly bloody narrative of earthly life and suffering. An existential, female drama.

In her studio there are now four paintings from a visit to the countryside around Vishny-Volochok. During a summer spent in Russia Ann Edholm returned to landscape painting. Four large paintings make up the series entitled Vishny-Volochok (2003). Like the colour samples on a strip of film there is an edging of yellow, orange, blue and green and between them a black area. In the painting The Garden (2003) the border encompasses a large square. And in the slightly smaller painting My Darkness the coloured borders compress the darkness into a small, black rectangle.

–The landscape is all around me. Sculpture, not a two-dimensional image, she explains. The black part in the middle also has something to do with being in the middle of one's life.

On the outside edge of one of the stretchers Ann Edholm has written the number 50. And after ten years as professor both at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm and the Valand School of fine Art in Gothenburg she has retired from teaching altogether. Now she is independent.

Outer or inner landscape. The dark surface is dented, marked and scarred. Experiences that have been lived and that have healed. Now she picks up the threads underneath. It takes time to weave together an artistic progress. She wants to return to uncharted territory but with greater distance and simplicity. Ann Edholm is searching for a new and more rapid pulse.

–I want to paint without it having anything to do with my life, she explains. Free me from being rooted in my body. I am finished with bodies.

She doesn't any longer want to talk about skin. In her most recent paintings she has removed the vernicle, the skin, the surface. Behind all this she found the blackness, the living darkness.

–The opening itself. Suddenly everything was different and very positive. But I do not yet know for certain where I am on my way to.

First published in Nilsson, Isabella (ed.): Ann Edholm. Uppsala – Kristinehamn: Uppsala konstmuseum – Kristinehamns konstmuseum, 2003.

## Remarks in June 2011

In 2003, encircled by the paintings of the series Vishny-Volochok, we talked for hours and hours about life and art. Four big paintings in black with thin edgings of yellow, orange, blue and green are leaning against the studio wall, listening. In the painting Garden a strip of colour encloses a big black rectangle. In a bit smaller painting, My Darkness, the colours are swelling out. The blackness has dwindled into a small rectangle. A memento: Ann Edholm is right in the middle of life.

She is her own now. Uncertain of how to continue. But focused on an art without biographical support. Released from

physicalness. Surface, skin, sudarium, all these she has left behind her. Convinced that she is "finished with the body". Beyond wounds, holes, cavities, and words she has come upon what she herself calls "the opening itself" – The blackness!

Eight years and a rich harvest of new works later the blackness of Garden appears as fertilized. At the same time My Darkness appears as an eye of the annunciation. Gazing inwards and out simultaneously. Born out of existence itself. Out of knowing. Out of that existence which she herself has called "a small dark inner space". A looking darkness. A blackness which knows how to speak.

And Ann Edholm was, by no means, finished with the body! Quite the reverse. In fact, she explained, back in 2003, that the expression "the word as a sharp point pressed against the eye" had to be understood as a linkage of words and viewing, looking. But the linguistic word as such has been submitted. Instead the body has become her companion. The eye of the body, the bodily eye! Seeing, viewing, gazing beyond the words. Against the darkness. Through the darkness.

The distance and the lightness expected in the future were also absent. The toils and the troubles are equally there. The pulse is sometimes faster. But never less affective.

The series Tongue on the Tip, 2003 – 2010, includes 28 paintings. An existential Passion including just as many "stations" as the series. The structure, the framework, is supported by the stations "in order for me to avoid thinking". Come what may. The body, the experiences of life, are spreading out laterally. A painting is born out of another painting. Intuitively and with confidence. The tongue comes before the word. Faster than the word. Where the word was pointed at viewing, there the tongue and the darkness are now.

She knows something about darkness. She recognizes, navigating firmly. In this way the dark stories of humankind are given a body of human dimensions. Are resurrected. The painting conceived as human space.

She knows also a great deal about silence, holding one's tongue, confinement, and negation. The absent room, the absent space. The lost house. The people who disappeared. The silenced history.

The series At the Back of Silence, 2009, reveals grids, cavities, and openings in the closeness. Untold life, lives captured, lives kept silent, lives kept out. Silenced knowledge. The empty darkness prevails. Voids and mute shrieks are lined up.

Ann Edholm's painting is found to be at the horizon of the unseen, the one lost and strongly present. The titles of the works tell of

frontier positions. Of the tilting between the impossible / the possible, between closed / open, between extinction / resurrection, darkness / light, seen / unseen. Created. Annihilated. Expressed. Returned. The series Tongue on the Tip is bulging by that which wants to take shape. By that which almost emerges. For me the stations of the series based on Jewish experience take me step by step to the very last one – the utmost one.

In the painting Celan, 2007, only one colour remains at the edging. The poet Celan took his own life after the Shoah. The Romanian Jewish poet rests in a big black rectangle. An elevated orange-coloured edging in the saturated darkness of the picture moulds into a thin rectangle. A glaring quivering mourning border! Runs vibrating like a shriek. For ever wandering about in the darkness. An eternal "Todesfuga".

Twenty-six piercing long and narrow triangles – black and orange-coloured by turn – horizontally intersected into each other. The work is entitled Kaddish, 2007, the Jewish mourning prayer. Orange against black. Black against orange. Light against darkness. fighting. Black-orange pierced knuckles engaged in a feverish prayer, like an incantation.

No, the roaring outcry of sorrow!

Reaching the terminal station – Übergang, 2010. A majestic painting. Seven broad, sharp orange-coloured triangular points run from right and left into a black center. Trying to meet each others. Trying to conquer the picture. Clutching, digging their claws into the darkness, licking it. Hungry flames of fire. Glaring at the edge of blindness.

Übergang, Untergang, Umschlagplatz – Holocaust!

The systematically organized chaos.

But the blackness slits the orange-coloured yellow light open. Tears it apart!

The sharp orange-coloured edges are chopped into split-wood, blades of grass, hay, straw. Chaff in the cattle trucks at the bottom of humankind. Becoming traces of...

The darkness of the painting embraces history, the memories, and the human beings. A saturated darkness. A darkness that holds. A presence.

With the darkness Ann Edholm has racked her brain. Wounded, injured, forced. It won't be unleashed until it opens. Gives off. And like a black hidden stage the course of events may start again. The story telling of the ultimate breakdown takes shape. Emerges.

The vibrato of the painting. Possible to feel only through one's body. Inviting to step in.

The blackness calms down into a divine moment of presence.

The painting of the last station – the utmost one – becomes a place of abode for "the drowned and the saved". The writer and the Auschwitz-survivor Primo Levi's last credo. All those lost in darkness. All those swallowed, untold. A silent mumbling seems to emerge out of the picture. A hardly discernible phantasmagoria of horror, annihilation, changes place with the strong presence. Does the unseen, do the lost ones, emerge out of the deep darkness of the painting? Do they take shape? Do they speak? A glimpse of return. A flash at the border crossing of annihilation.

In the corner of my eye I discover writings jotted down by the artist at the edge of the canvas – Linking to the inscriptions in the death camps. Like secret messages hidden in the heels. Hoping to be found one day, to be seen. Telling. Bearing witness.

The image and the memory working as the only surety against the darkness.

The last station, Übergang – Silencing – Not annihilated. Not keeping silent. Not silenced. Living in the vibrato within yourself!

The United Nations was born in 1945 out of the last century's utmost breakdown. Ann Edholm's proposal for the UN headquarters, 2010 – 2011, is called Dialogos.