



Christer Strömholm
Grekiskan / The Greek, ca. 1969
gelatin-silver print

Anders Marner

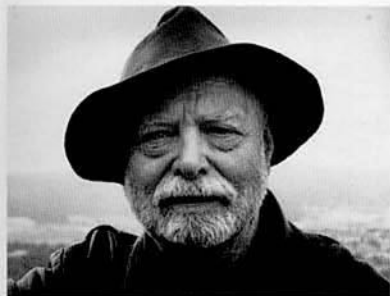
Christer Strömholm and First-Person Surrealism

Of all Scandinavian photographers, Christer Strömholm has most successfully promoted the integration of photography into the art world. His 1986 solo exhibition *9 sekunder av mitt liv* (9 Seconds of My Life) at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm attracted 32,500 visitors.¹ The show could be described as Strömholm's definitive breakthrough as an artist, if not even the most important manifestation of photographic art in Sweden to date. Yet, on a number of points, the interpretation of Strömholm's pictures in relation to the art world remains unclear. On the one hand, his photographs are presented under slogans such as "subjective photography" and "the private image," suggesting the importance of the personal in his work. On the other hand, Strömholm's photography has also been discussed in the context of social realism. His images of the transsexuals at the Place Blanche in Paris have become the estab-

lished prototype of Swedish documentary photography, playing an important role in the sexual-political struggle in recent decades. Thus a social realistic reading stresses the importance of the subject matter and social engagement in Strömholm's work.

These two lines of discussion run parallel and cannot, it seems, be reconciled. An alternative angle of interpretation would be to see the images in relation to the Surrealist aesthetic. In what follows, I will attempt such an interpretation, drawing together the two strands of discussion of Strömholm's photographs, so as to see them as a coherent oeuvre.

In his article "The Surrealist Image: Structure and Ethics — Notes Towards an Investigation," Jan-Gunnar Sjölin maintains that the first Surrealist move is *isolation* which leads to the *redundancy* of the object.² For instance, in a collage, the objects (or pictures) depicted are separated from their respective contexts. The main device in Chris-



At the age of almost eighty the legendary Swedish photographer will receive the Erna & Victor Hasselblad Photography Award this spring. After studies and residency in Paris in the 1950s Christer Strömholm founded a famous photography school in Stockholm in the 1960s. His books include *Poste Restante*, 1966, *Vännerna från Place Blanche*, 1983, and *Testimony*, scheduled for publication this year.

ter Strömholm's photography is precisely isolation — isolation of the object, of part of the object, of the person, of the gaze, of the world, and of the image itself. It should be possible to see his work as a rhetorical digression from what is usually called the lifeworld, that is to say, from the world we take for granted in our everyday life — the place where our body and our consciousness connect with the rest of the world.

By placing the object in the centre of the picture, Strömholm creates a margin. This margin is often accentuated by a second frame within the image, which once more separates the object from its context. (The photograph has of course already effected an initial separation.) The isolation is frequently emphasised through lighting: the pictures are darker in the corners than they are in the centre. However, for Strömholm, isolation is more than just a matter of composition. It is not just for formalistic effect that he places the figures in the middle of the picture. The rhetoric seems instead to be directed "downwards," in that it tends to "reify" the objects and to make them alien. We as viewers are banished from the "human" lifeworld to a world of separate objects where context and intersubjectivity have lost their importance.

For Strömholm, isolation means more than just isolation on the picture plane, or the isolation of the object depicted from other objects or persons. Even on a deeper level, *concealment* is often used, which accentuates the isolation even further. Concealment makes the object difficult to identify — we are not allowed to complete the act of perception. Instead of the entire object we expect, we see only the point of view. The viewer is consequently alienated from the object. Walls, gratings, surfaces in various materials, textiles and curtains are some examples of the use of overlap in Strömholm's pictures — pictures which seem to convince us that the world is a prison, or that the world is a picture hiding the real world from view. The pictures usually contain an obstacle that blocks the gaze as well as further action. The subject depicted might also be purposely insignificant, abominable or uninteresting.

Often, the object is contained in a "box," more or less enclosed on all sides. Whether or not there are further frames within the image, the picture plane has a reserved air. And there is also the element of concealment which renders the object more or less inaccessible to the viewer. Thus the use of frames within the image is in some sense connected with the obstruction of sight. You get a sense of a box, a box that cannot be opened. The pictures are quite simply



Christer Strömholm
Oljedunken / Oil barrel, ca. 1992
gelatin-silver print

mysterious. The mystery that most of us feel when viewing his images results from a combination of isolation and concealment. We might compare Strömholm's work to an early surrealist picture, Man Ray's *L'énigme d'Isidore Ducasse* (1920), which is at once a Surrealist object and a photograph depicting an unknown object concealed under a blanket.

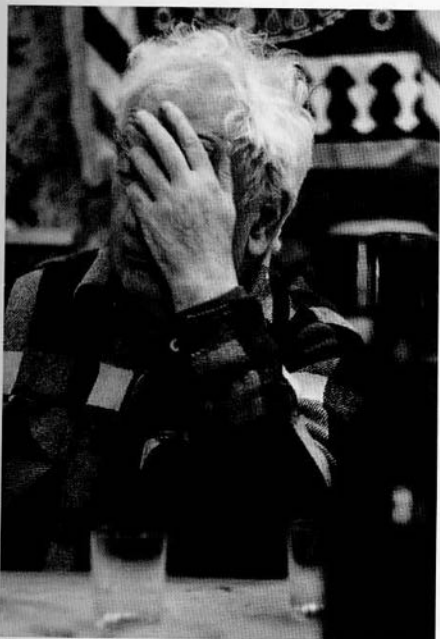
Even Strömholm's use of old, worn-out items as *objets trouvés* is an isolating device — an old object loses its original meaning when it is wrested from its context and from its relation to other objects. This is the Surrealist manner: removing objects from the lifeworld (we recall the Surrealists' enthusiasm for the flea market) so as to turn them

into discoveries, and thereby to renew them. Walter Benjamin has compared the Surrealist preoccupation with "the ruins of the bourgeoisie" with the Renaissance preoccupation with classical ruins. However, Strömholm's objects have little to do with nostalgia. Retrospection is not really the aim: he does not seek to evoke times past. The images of worn-out daily objects allow room for no "story." Instead, they are lifted out of time. And if there is a story in Strömholm's photographs, it is a transgressive one: it points towards death or emptiness.

If we imagine that the typical photographic image is referential, that is, a picture representing the world, we realise that many

of Strömholm's photographs depict the world itself as an image or a stage. What we are shown in the pictures is often still a sign for something else. A sculpture, a further image, or a linguistic fragment is reproduced. And even before the picture is taken, Strömholm's subjects are often already mediated, removed to a second degree of fictionality, insofar as they are derived from the world of the variety show or represent other images or signs. In other words, the images are meta-images — images of other images or signs. When it is reproduced in a picture, the second degree of fictionality becomes accentuated in its theatricality and pictoriality. Theatrical "masks" embody the mystery that is humanity. This is probably what Strömholm has in mind when he says that "people are pictures of themselves." An image, as an image, evokes reality as an image rather than reality itself. An image as an image stresses the way in which an image conceals true reality. "All the world is a stage" — the metaphor could be applied to Strömholm's pictures of variety artists, but also to his images of transsexuals, insofar as they, too, are signs — men signifying women.

Indeed, isolation and concealment also pervade the images of transsexuals. Critical



Christer Strömholm
Alexander Calder, ca. 1962
gelatin-silver print

here departs from the usual method of documentary reportage. The device of concealment is also present in the images of the transsexuals, in that they also project a surface (female appearance), hiding a secret (male attributes), which can be suspected or dimly seen.

Placed in the context of Surrealism, which entails the use of devices such as isolation and concealment, the images lose their social realistic character, and we come to interpret them in a completely different way. The photographer's engagement on behalf of the marginalized group is no longer quite as evident, because now mystery (maleness) is the effect suggested by the rhetoric conjured up by the images. What the viewer first sees (the female) must be made strange in such a way that the hidden male attributes are projected onto the female that the viewer expected to see. The transsexuals themselves, on the contrary, strive to erase their masculinity in terms of gender as well as sex. The photographs thus do not unequivocally side with the transsexuals in the sexual-political struggle. However, this should not be seen as a weakness, but as an expression of the art work's independence in relation to its subject.

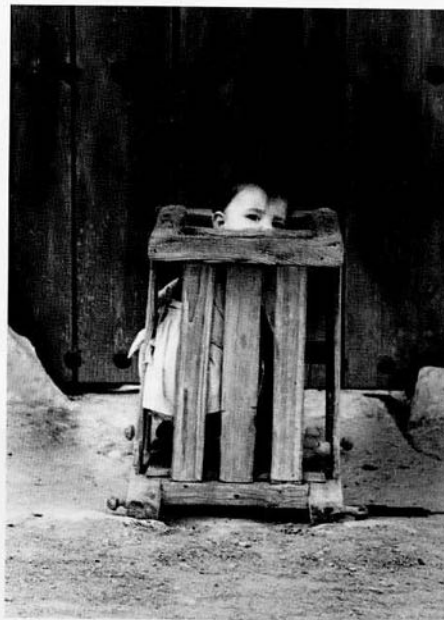
The pictures of transsexuals no longer depict a social and geographical "reality," i.e. the actual transsexuals at the Place Blanche. Rather, the transsexuals are Surrealistic in the sense that they seek to unite what cannot be united, conjoining male and female in the same body. The transsexuals become rhetorical in relation to the expectations of the life-world. Further, they become what classical rhetoricians call oxymorons, conjunctions of contradictory terms.

The other Surrealist manoeuvre, André Breton's favourite device, is *dépaysement*, which involves placing the isolated object in another world or milieu.³ However, *dépaysements* rarely occur in Strömholm's work, at least not with Breton's aim of unifying the separate worlds in a soaring rhetoric which optimistically seeks to create an ethereal, "transparent" and thus superior world.⁴

One might imagine the socio-realistic reading of the pictures of transsexuals to be in line with Breton's optimistic view of the dissolution of oppositions and his vision of a transparent future society. Breton has written: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak."⁵ Unifying opposites could in this case tally perfectly with a transsexual identity.

However, the chief devices in Strömholm's image world are isolation and con-

cealment, and this is where he is content to stop. He is not interested in creating a better and more unified world along the lines of Breton, but is more akin to another Surrealist, Georges Bataille, whose ideas of mutilation, sacrificial rites, separation, and downward rhetoric lead to an anti-humanistic stance, thanks to the strong emphasis on materialism. Instead of humanising, Bataille chooses to animalise and to reify.⁶ This contrasts with Breton's ascending, spiritualised,



Christer Strömholm
Pojke i lådan / Boy in box, Spain, 1963
gelatin-silver print

and ultimately optimistic thinking, which Bataille considers far too idealistic.

Presumably, Bataille would not like to imagine that a social liberation process could lead to universal acceptance of transsexuals, seeing as the constant transgression of taboos is for him more important than eventual unity. For Bataille, transgression of limits presupposes a taboo. Thus, for Bataille, what is most important is not unification, as it is for Breton, but rather the opposition between the two rhetorical poles — that is, oxymorons.

In Strömholm's photographs of transsexuals, the male as well as the female remains intact and the effect of the images rests on the rhetoric that arises out of this basic human distinction. It is precisely the border in between that constitutes the pervasive theme.

Viewer as Picture-Self: Two Variants

Turning now to Strömholm's photographs of variety artists, we observe a highly interesting movement. In two of his most well-known images, *With Peter* and *The Boy and the Fishnet Stocking*, we detect the presence of two viewers. One is in the space depicted, i.e. in the picture, the other is in the referen-

tial space, immediately outside the space depicted, being the implied viewer of the scene. Strömholm could be said to have failed in these photographs, in that they do not quite achieve the requisite isolation. As already noted, Strömholm prefers to focus information in the centre of the photograph. Yet in the images under discussion, the objects are distributed over the picture surface, and some are cut off by the picture border. The person viewing the scene, (i.e. myself, the viewer), is in these photographs separated from the object first and foremost by the presence of the viewer within the image, who has, as it were, usurped "my" place.

I, the viewer, cannot come near the object. Nor can the viewer within the picture, who is frustrated by the concealing effect. In *The Boy and the Fishnet Stocking*, the variety scene depicted represents another level of fictionality compared with the audience. Besides, the woman watched by the boy exists outside the picture, in the referential space, cropped off as she is by the edge of the photograph, which may imply that the woman is in fact

part of the boy's fantasy. In *With Peter*, the man watching the snake woman is unable to reach her, because she is encased in glass. Moreover, she too, represents another degree of fictionality, because she is a variety artist and he is a member of the audience. In other words, the snake woman is isolated. Further, the presence of a rival viewer within the picture in a sense renders it less interesting for what might be called the *picture-self*, the self of the implied viewer.

However, in many other pictures — in fact, in most of Strömholm's pictures — the viewer within the picture has disappeared and the picture-self, the implied viewer of the depiction, is directly confronted with the concealing effect. By the notion of the "picture-self" I mean a position within the image which can be assumed by the sender and the viewer alike. The picture-self is whoever sees what the picture represents, and who accordingly remains unseen in it. Although unseen, this person is in Strömholm's world often the most important person in the image. In other words, the picture-self is not just a

person depicted in the image. In Strömholm's photographs, the picture-self is often a person who experiences alienation and who is isolated from the ordinary lifeworld and culture in which the rest of us participate. Most of Strömholm's pictures illustrate the curtailed perspective of the picture-self, who struggles to discern the objects that appear. The picture-self is thus a dramatised figure and need not necessarily be identical with the photographer, just as the protagonist of a novel need not be identical with its author.

Given the isolation of the object in the picture plane, and the concealment of the deeper level by means of gratings, screens, or some kind of surface running parallel with the picture plane, in many of Strömholm's photographs, the picture-self can directly confront the discontinuity that being human entails. The picture-self is now no longer just a witness coolly distanced from the event, but instead a participant in the drama. The viewer inside the image is evicted and the main character is now the picture-self, the viewer just outside the depicted space who watches the events unfolding therein.

What has happened is that the relationship between left and right in the picture, from the viewer depicted to a more or less hidden object, has instead been transported to the deeper plane. The hidden object has been placed in the centre of the picture and the viewer has been shifted from the depicted space to the implied position which is the referential space. This means that the viewer has become invisible, becoming instead the person who looks at the picture, the picture-self, i.e., you or me. Moreover, this constitutes a better solution in terms of gestalt psychology, because the problem of the image can be solved with greater elegance and simplicity, yet with sustained complexity.

The Predicament of the Picture-Self

The situation in which we, as picture-selves, find ourselves in Strömholm's photographs can also be called *la condition humaine* — a situation where the ordinary lifeworld's intersubjectivity and dialogicity is put out of action and there arises a state of existential loneliness: the stark condition of things, with the minimum of narrative. Just as interior monologue and direct speech have ousted the omniscient narrator in the modern novel, in Strömholm's photography, the picture-self with its unique perspective replaces the customary referential image and the concomitant all-seeing eye that was once supposed to show "reality."

Strömholm's pictures provide a ready-prepared position for the subject. In the *preferred reading*, i.e., the interpretation that the sender (Strömholm) seeks to elicit, viewers



Christer Strömholm
Med Peter / With Peter, ca. 1956
gelatin-silver print



Christer Strömholm
 Pojken och nätstrumpan / The Boy and the Fishnet Stocking, ca. 1961
 gelatin-silver print

must adapt to sender-oriented expectations. Simultaneously, however, they are invited to take their fate in their own hands. Here, then, we have a complex social relation. To become truly yourself, you must leave yourself behind, along with your place in the urgent lifeworld. It is as though the pictures uttered a dictatorial edict: "You *must* be free!" The viewer can always reject the sender's demand. But then we would no longer be dealing with the preferred reading.

To isolate and to conceal is to disavow the way in which objects are unified in the lifeworld. They thus become charged with a certain meaninglessness, because reality truly is elusive and hidden to us humans. It is only by recognizing the condition of extreme particularity and separateness that the picture-self is able to see its image — which then reveals the world as being elusive, hidden and strange, because in an image, the separate perspective is one of discontinuity.

The self is enclosed in a body that needs the other, but is unable to reach it. Separateness entails a lack, and the lack is the absence of reality in its totality. It is not through unification in life but through distinctness in death that we can be united. Death is the absolute referent.

There is always something missing. What is shown is not intended to be shown, but something else. The picture-self is ill at ease in its discontinuous and maimed predicament, its human coign of vantage. Images aim to show something else — that an image does not represent reality, but rather, that "reality is an image." Reality, as we experience it with our senses, is a screen, a front, a

show, a veil or a mask covering the monstrosity that is reality. Strömholm would in fact wish to show us what is beyond the range of the human eye, the ultimate referent that exposes the impossibility of the image. What we see is a show and what cannot be seen is reality. The image is a substitute for death, for freedom and for the cessation of separation. The subject intended is not the subject that is shown, but, strictly speaking, all subjects at once. The image intended is not just that particular image, but finally an image of coexisting perspectives, the total picture — what God sees.

The theories of Jacques Lacan are frequently applied to the study of photography, yet critics seldom spell out the precise role that Lacan plays in their research. There is often confusion between Lacan as a philosophical "influence" and Lacan's theories as ontological meta-theories. However, Lacan's theories can only say so much about pictures because, strictly speaking, they are hostile towards pictures. Lacan is eager to rush on from the picture towards another, usually linguistic, world. His theories are variants of the linguistic imperialism that seeks to show the dominance of language over images and over the lifeworld. If we are interested in pictures, we should not choose Lacan as our guide to them.

Lacan can nevertheless have relevance to Strömholm's photographs, albeit of an unexpected sort. Lacan launched his career in the Surrealist journals. And Surrealism also contains a "dark" variant that contrasts with Breton's optimistic Surrealism. It was a Sur-

realist, Roger Caillois, who gave Lacan the idea of the mirror stage and of the gaze coming from the outside. Another member of this loose group was Georges Bataille.

If we treat Lacan's ideas historically, and not as a theory that enjoys meta-status and explanatory power, we can see that a Surrealism exists, even in photography (Bellmer, Boiffard, etc.) which foregrounds ideas of isolation, mutilation, human sacrifices, dehumanisation and lack. Lacan, with his emphasis on Freud's death drive, can be seen as a participant in this particular artistic and philosophical debate in the 1930s. And Strömholm, perhaps, continues the movement in the present day.

Translated by Philip Landon

1. *Expressen*, 24 June 1986.
2. Sjölin, J.-G., *Den surrealistiska bilden Struktur och etik - anteckningar inför en undersökning*. Department of Art History, University of Lund. Undated.
3. In *Communicating Vessels*, he writes:
 "To compare two objects as far distant as possible one from the other or, by any other method, to confront them in a brusque and striking manner, remains the highest task to which poetry can ever aspire. Its unequalled, unique power should tend more and more to practise drawing out the concrete unity of the two terms placed in relation and to communicate to each of them, whatever it may be, a vigour that it lacked as long as it was considered in isolation". (Breton, A., *Communicating Vessels*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990 p. 109.)
4. In "*Signe ascendant*" (1947), Breton describes Surrealism as an irreversible process where the development goes towards that which is put in place of the other. He writes:
 "Let notice be taken: The analogical image, to the degree that it illuminates in the brightest way *partial similarities*, will not be traduced in terms of equation. It moves between the two realities present in a determined way *which is never reversible*. From the first of these realities to the second, it marks a vital tension turned possibly towards health, pleasure, quietude, given thanks, consented usages. It has as its mortal enemies the deprecativ and the depressing". (Breton A. "Rising Sign." In: Breton, A. *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*. Ed. & intr. Franklin Rosemont. London: Pluto Press, 1978. [pp. 280-283.] P. 282.)
 In the same context, Breton refers to Jean Cocteau's "Guitar — a bidet that sings" as an example of the deprecativ and the depressing, and goes on to quote a Zen author:
 The best light on the general, obligatory sense that the image worthy of the name must have is furnished by a Zen writer: "Out of Buddhist kindness, Basho one day ingeniously changed a cruel haiku composed by his humorous disciple, Kikaku. The latter having written, "A red dragonfly—tear off its wings — a pimento", Basho substituted "A pimento— add wings — a red dragonfly!" (*Ibid.*, p. 283.)
5. Breton, A. "Manifesto of Surrealism." In: Breton, A. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969. (pp. 1-47.) P. 14.
6. Bataille suggested "an irruption of excremental forces (the excessive violation of modesty, positive algolagnia, the violent excretion of the sexual object coinciding with a powerful or tortured ejaculation, the libidinal interest in cadavers, vomiting, defecation...)" (Bataille, G., "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)." In Bataille, G., *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Minneapolis, 1985 p. 92.). In *Documents* 1 No. 7 Bataille uses the word *informe*, formless, to obliterate the supremacy of concepts and classification. Bataille regards reality as something shapeless and intangible. Under the banner of the *informe*, Bataille contends that "affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit." (Bataille, G., "Formless," in Bataille, G., *ibid.* 1985 p. 31 and Bataille, G., "Informe," in *Documents* 1 No. 7 1929 p. 382. Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1991.)