

Features /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
10 OCT 2003

With A Little Help From My Friends

Annika Ström



Although Annika Ström makes videos, music, posters and objects, you could say that her primary medium is everyday life, mixed with doubt - not only about the big, familiar dilemmas such as art or love, but about why a loaf of organic bread might be wrapped in plastic, or what to do about the strain on people's elbows when they lean out of windows. Despite the tinge of sadness that colours much of it, her work is also shot through with a quizzical, near-existential pleasure in the physical world. Even as someone murmurs 'I don't know' (*Six Songs for a Time Like This*, 2001) her camera will concentrate with delight on the twilight drifting across a cup or a paper clip sparkling in the dull noon:

'I don't know what to do
I don't know what to do
I have this feeling for you
I don't know what to do.'

Ström, who writes and performs soundtracks to her videos in English, Swedish and German, mines non sequiturs like diamonds, editing her images and observations into diaristic, often funny, montages shot through with reverie, melancholy and yearning for elusive states such as domestic harmony, a good man or a successful art practice. Her wistful voice floats over images like a fragile, poppy Nico. Her lyrics often bear no relation to the scene depicted, and have vaguely worried titles such as 'I Don't Know What to Sing', 'If You Only Knew', 'I Was There But You Weren't There', 'I Didn't Do Anything Wrong to You' and 'I Saw a Nice Man'. Accompanied by a Casio keyboard, which she programmes to perform simple, repetitive, musical phrases, this is songwriting at its most pared down. Simple, often sentimental, words and phrases are repeated to an almost dislocated degree, which conversely lends them a curious, hypnotic clarity. Perhaps this is the glory of the pop song; words that look simple on paper can often, when sung, reflect the most elaborate feelings. She describes this as 'letting others share the pain ... It seems like music is the only place where it is totally acceptable to let out feelings like that.'

Ström's videos are furnished with people (often herself, her family or friends), performing everyday tasks - growing a pumpkin or plumping a pillow, learning how to use a mobile phone, washing a rug or being mesmerized by a hole-puncher. Ström is from southern Sweden and the countryside - mountains, lakes, forests - features prominently, along with living-rooms and windows. Scenes abruptly change mood and emphasis. An image of a horse on the television being trained, for example, will cut suddenly to someone swearing loudly in a sitting-room. Odd, beautiful or unexpected details leap out of the most ordinary situations - a ray of light in a dull schoolroom, the swing of a skirt on a girl dancing by herself, a hand touching a light switch or an old man gazing with affection at his favourite chair.

Occasionally Ström's art interacts with the world in a practical, kindly way. A few years ago, for instance, she put an advertisement in various art papers, which read 'Grant. One week bed and breakfast in Berlin for talented but temporarily frustrated, envious and/or uninspired artist'. Once chosen, the depressed visitor was looked after by Ström, who put them up in her elegant Berlin flat, made them breakfast and had her friends and artists (who were not allowed to talk about their work) show them around Berlin. If they so desired, Ström would introduce them to gallerists and critics who might be able to help their careers. In the subsequent video, *Grant* (1996), which documents some of the recipients, one young artist comments, 'I know now that it's not so bad because some other people are taking care of me'.

In a similar vein, her video *Windowpillow* (1995) explores different attitudes to everyday voyeurism. In Berlin people leaning out of their windows to observe street life are a familiar sight, but in Sweden, apparently, it is common to place mirrors at an angle next to the window in order secretly to observe passers-by. In response to her research (which included observations such as 'the best local TV is the window-sill!') Ström made spongy cushions with specially designed indentations to accommodate the previously unsupported elbows of people who like to lean out and look. Another strangely practical video, *Five Reasons* (1999), explores the possible functions of tears. If enough are collected, according to Ström - who is seen weeping in her studio and siphoning her tears into a vessel - they could be used for showering, wetting a stamp or making sad, salty ice cubes.



Sequences and songs illuminating connections between people, the solace of inanimate objects or the innate lack of logic in the world are often inflected with a kind of meta-observation - an artist reflecting on what it means to be an artist. In *Artist Film* (1996), for example, Ström asked various people what they would like to be if they weren't artists. (Claudia: 'A political journalist or a psychiatrist - I thought art was meaningful but I was wrong.' Petri: 'A gardener, because I think it's weird to put flowers in squares or around pedestrian roads or in circles, but it is somehow nice that they do it.') More recently, for *Been in Video* (2002), Ström questioned people who had - and hadn't - been included in her videos and how they felt about the experience. 'I whistled a little tune', says Ate, 'but I was cut out. Something I will never forget.'

Explanations and evasions are woven in equal measure into the fabric of our days. Hours are filled with inconsequential words, thoughts and actions - often meaningless, seemingly apolitical gestures which we employ to explain ourselves somehow to ourselves and to others; even if explanation remains elusive. Ström's approach, which could loosely be described as collage, is a celebration of modest irrationalism, one in which meaning is not closed down or pigeonholed but gently broken open, allowed to breathe or simply to disappear. For example, in the video *Six Songs for a Time Like This* a man plays golf and loses his ball; as he looks for it, we hear Ström murmur off-camera, 'While I was waiting for my evening tea to get ready I took the time to remove my make-up with the older cleansing lotion. I thought it had been stupid of me to buy a new bottle, before the old one was finished. I had also bought new cotton pads, but I was tempted to take from the new ones.' Interest here (and this is a scene that is weirdly compelling) is created from the most economical of means. Images collide in a confusingly reasonable way - and it's their very reasonable-ness that creates a sense of bewilderment.

Choosing to be an artist means having to learn to cope with criticism, of yourself and from other people. Ström's recent show at Casey Kaplan's in New York was entitled 'Everything in this Show Can Be Held Against Me' and included wall texts that echo her understanding of art's often oblique function and its relationship to that vague entity - forged from a mixture of ruthlessness and solace - which constitutes 'the art world'. The text pieces ranged from declarations such as 'for a period of time this piece of art will keep you going' to 'this piece is made to support me' and 'ah I want so much to do a political piece of art'.

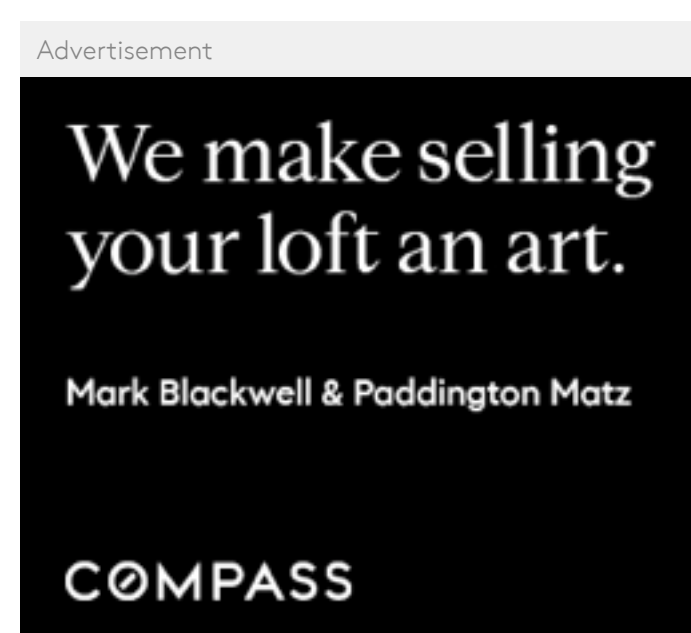
According to Ström, her most recent video, *16 Minutes* (2003), deals with the 'storage of memory and the people you happen to have around you or stored in your photo album, who are the desperate confirmation of your own existence. A confirmation which is pointless as they will leave, disappear and die.' In the video - which includes scenes such as an old man proudly showing off photographs of his favourite flowers; television programmes of ice-skating; and rolls of coloured tape rolling along the floor - various characters try to describe other people. Whereas one woman talks with obsessive detail about 'the most beautiful man I have ever seen', who sat opposite her on a train and then disappeared, a man tries - and fails - to describe his girlfriend, whom he sees everyday.

Doubt is an everyday activity, and one that, like most such activities, is subsumed into others. Without ever being literal, Ström taps into the feeling you get when you're frustrated, bored or lost and, instead of confronting the cause, you gaze at the sky or clean a cupboard. Her recognition of the way thoughts collapse and collide at the oddest moments offers more consolation than explanation - but it's fair to assume there is none to be had. Life may be full of illusions, she seems to be saying, but, like the street lamp you confuse with the moon when you're doing the washing up, they're illusions built from something very real.

JENNIFER HIGGIE
Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze*'s first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

First published in Issue 78
October 2003

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