

CM VON HAUSSWOLFF'S "I AM THE OTHERS"
A REVIEW

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I write this post having freshly returned from a few amazing weeks in Stockholm, where I was the guest of the venerable [EMS studios](#) and built up a sizable catalog of modular synth recordings to be used in future projects (yes, audio projects...I am still very much alive in that field.) It's impossible, even with this journey at the forefront of my memory, to pick a true 'standout' experience that came from it, and certain categories of experience - such as my exceptional treatment by that sector of the local arts community that I fell into - merit full write-ups all on their own. As I told friends upon my first visit to the city over 10 years ago, it was an inoxicating relief to be in a place where the strength or originality of one's ideas seemed to take precedence over "status" when it came to booking public appearances and the like, and this impression has for the most part held up. To be talked to as a peer among local luminaries (even when they can rightfully claim to be on a higher plateau of accomplishment than myself) is something incredibly rare within an arts world that is no freer from competitive machinations than any other province of human activity.

One of my guides during this last adventure was my friend [Carl Michael von Hausswolff](#), whose intensely refined and economical *modus operandi* belies a man with a fluid sense of humor and an infectious, glowing enthusiasm. It pains me that I even have to offer up these qualities as a defense against accusations which are now being made against him, by at least one lazy journalist at the *Wire* and by numerous others who never bothered to ask the artist himself about his intentions. As some of you may know, CMVH - like [John Duncan](#) before him - is embroiled now in a controversy calling into question his use of mortal remains in his artwork. This controversy is so heavily documented in mainstream news sources that I feel no need to refer back to it again (and, as long as the bar for journalistic integrity is already being set so low by people who made no attempts to contact the artist for comment, I feel almost justified in my own laziness.) I will merely add here that, through years of dealings with 'Micki,' I find him simply incapable of making a work of art whose sole purpose is to nakedly disrespect or defile its subject: he has a nuanced approach that is light-years beyond the kind of desperate carnival shock tactics we can usually find in 'extreme' ghettos of pop culture, and his works, which are fashioned to behave more like question marks than as exclamation points, also have a shelf-life superior to the quickly diminishing returns of such efforts.

This is nowhere more evident than in *Jag är de andra* ["I am the Others"], the unorthodox exhibit CMVH assembled for [Lundskonsthall](#) in 2013 (the artist recently gifted me a copy of the exhibition catalog.) I say 'unorthodox' here because most of the "artists" featured in this exhibit either did not identify as such, or ended up creating works of a unique aesthetic and spiritual resonance that were meant seemingly as asides or secondary features of more 'important' projects. Von Hausswolff indicates an affinity for "the act of becoming-artist without giving oneself that title" and proposes that "more artists should copy that; it's about learning how to live."¹ I interpret the "Others" in the title to refer to be these unwitting artists, given that there is no professional artistic category that could be assigned to them other than, well, "other."

The work included in the exhibit is mostly of a documentary nature rather than a collection of artefacts contributed directly by the individuals surveyed: news clippings, archival footage of different types - one of the only items of a non-documentary nature (a mysterious found film strip of a sunrise) belongs to an unknown artist. Elsewhere, artworks come in the form of unacknowledged masterpieces built into acknowledged ones: photo stills of the town "Hell" which, in the story arc of the classic Clint Eastwood western [High Plains Drifter](#), is a collaborative project by townsfolk to paint their entire town red in order to trick or dissuade a group of marauding cutthroats. This artwork-within-an-artwork is amusingly cataloged as a "painting" within the larger exhibit, and works as well as any other item from "Others..." to encapsulate the major theme forwarded above by von Hausswolff: namely, do we need to wait for creators' self-identification as artists before something can be acknowledged as such? Does the existence of "Hell" as a set piece within a fictional (cinematic) narrative make it any less valid as an artwork than the similar pieces by von Hausswolff himself?² Or, to take another example from the exhibit - does the sardonic humor of the *Militärligan*'s machine-gun art (a "smiley face," rendered with expert marksmanship on a bulletproof glass pane during a bank robbery) not have a similar level of artistry as William Burroughs' famed "shotgun" paintings, as well as a similar tincture of social defiance, and an insinuation that not even the instruments of death have to be limited in their functionality?

Calling upon subject matter such as the legendary Japanese Imperial Army holdout [Hiroo Onoda](#), and Corazon Amurao (sole survivor of Richard Speck's 1966 mass-slaying of Chicago student nurses), CMVH is already wading through territory that could be claimed in

a much less sophisticated fashion by mere fetishists of the 'extreme.' Yet his choice of these subjects, and his implication that they be raised to the status of artists, is itself something of a challenge to the formal art world to re-assess its efforts at pushing the boundaries of human discipline and endurance, and especially to re-assess the motivations behind these efforts. As von Hausswolff reminds us in his discussion on Onoda, "...I think his extreme endurance, or indeed obstinacy, 'ups the ante' for a while genre of endurance performance - in a manner of speaking [...] I've also done performances myself that lasted 24 or 48 hours, and my stage shows or concerts sometimes took five or eight hours. So that's the background for the interest in [him]."³

This brings me to another specific impression that one receives from *Jag är de andra*: namely, that verifiable reality is far from being exhausted in its ability to fascinate or to inspire on a level normally associated with unverifiable folk legends. CMVH admits as much, and he has always been something of the "anti-fictional" artist *par excellence*, guiding us to a world where fantastic phenomena (e.g. communication with the dead) are attempted by people with quotidian means, and one in which the failures to achieve such fantastic breakthroughs are as meaningful as the successes, since all of these instances reveal a drive to go beyond customary routine and the realm of the fully predictable.

The *Jag är de andra* collection repeatedly hints that inspiration may be achieved irrespective of one's conscious awareness about being "inspiring" (and, in fact, a lack of awareness regarding this potential may lead to more spectacular flourishes of inspiration than those instances involving a clear focus and a conscious aim.) Von Hausswolff urges us to consider whether a boundary line really needs to be drawn between the activities of those in the "inspiration industry," and those whose aesthetically pleasing exceptionality proceeds 'merely' from the way in which they deal with overwhelming or unusual circumstances. When considering the actions of featured individuals like the gangster Salvatore Luciana - whose building of a theatre in his Sicilian hometown is noted by von Hausswolff as a "sudden and unexpected impulse of altruism" - he also urges us to consider another form of artistry, in the form of isolated creative events that contradict the otherwise negative thrust of certain individuals' lives. This provides an interesting counterpoint to another exhibit inclusion, James B. Irwin - whose search for Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat was a lifelong project that, via an unswerving conviction, gave his actions a drama tantamount to that of "performance."

With all this in mind, *Jag är de andra* is something more than another "life into art" exhibit building upon Duchamp's legacy of aestheticizing the everyday, and it is also very different in character from past Conceptualist exhibits that have focused on the de-materializing of art. Because of its concentration upon documenting the most unequivocal areas of *experience*, or upon the materialization and attempted materialization of hopes, fears, dreams etc., von Hausswolff's showcase is practically the opposite of these de-materializing exercises. Von Hausswolff's engagement with (and ultimate identification with) "the others" therefore avoids the shortcomings of many Conceptualist works that become "a mechanism of homogenesis, where the desire to to merge art with life simply evaporates art rather than transforms life."⁴ The reminder of actual human qualities' aesthetic value is something refreshing to see in the arts, and provides a much more affecting message than the proliferation of new works based solely on "exposing" our capacity for ideological contradictions.



Originally posted at tbwbworks.typepad.com, 2014.

¹ Carl Michael von Hausswolff, *Jag är de andra*, p. 142. Trans. Anders Kreuger. Lundskonthall, Lund, 2013.

² See his "*Red*" series of artworks for a point of comparison.

³ Von Hauswolff (2013), p. 138.

⁴ Stephen Zepke, "The Concept of Art When Art is Not a Concept." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 11 No. 1., pp. 157-167.