ERIK GUSTAFSSON
A HOUSE OF CLAY

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Louis Nitze

As a student, where I first met Erik, I came across an article in Slagmark (Battleground), a magazine that publishes articles about the history of ideas. I became interested in the dry and instrumental term resilience, frequently used in social science, engineering, political science, and psychology. It refers to "a system or entity that can adapt to external as well as internal changes, influences, and challenges without 'breaking,' meaning without losing the fundamental properties and qualities that ex- isted before the challenge."[1] This logic within the scientific fields tends to avoid breaking points. In contrast, Erik Gustafsson's approach to photography is as open as possible to the idea that breaking points can and do appear, providing the possibility of bringing something new and beautiful into the world.

Gustafsson's work reflects upon the resilience of images and photography — how much can be done to an image or a pho- tograph before it breaks, metaphorically and literally? His work gives you the feeling that the camera has been turned inside-out, a deep investigation of photography's technical and ontological limits in his method and subsequent discoveries.

Gustafsson's artistic practice grows out of a fascination for subtle things that appear around him in his everyday life, espe- cially those we tend to take for granted and don't allow ourselves to drift into. These things are not just specific to him and his life but appear around us all. This subject is engaged with by Gustafsson both playfully and almost alchemistically. The drawn lines in some of his works are reminiscent of abstract notebook scribbles. They appear intuitive and represent all the artistic and ethical decisions that are made during the processes, something very human in a medium that historically has been seen as lacking "aura". [2]

Generally, people tend to think of photography as the printed result, but Gustafsson's work has shown that there is much more to it than that. It is as much about the act of creating a picture as it is about the picture itself—the act of balancing consciousness and coincidence. Gustafsson's approach significantly contributes to the liberation of photography from being a final product, or a means to an end. Through expos- ing the craft of photography, Gustafsson engineers the technical processes so that they themselves become part of the image's expression.

"For me, there is no right or wrong when working with my images; there areonly countless paths to take, always leading in some direction. Suddenly, you've mistakenly pressed a button in the darkroom, and something marvellous happens, so you want to continue exploring that one button until something new occurs." [3]

Every kind of subject or thought is allowed within his work; the idea of right and wrong is so very fixed to context, as everything changes when the context or surroundings change. Images are always influenced by their surroundings, of which Gustafsson seems fully aware. It is part of a piece of paper, a wall in the studio, a screen, a place, etc. When multiple images are shown within the same space, you begin to perceive them as related matter and reflect upon to what extent they are connected.

At one point, Gustafsson related an image to how he sees his own body of work and its changing nature, which stuck in my head. He spontaneously used the analogy of "a house of clay, that changes as people interact and engage with it" .[4] I imagined a house in front of me, with all its different rooms with their various functions. The entrance, the kitchen, the walls, the windows, the attic, the bedroom. A personal place that, at some point, you think of as a home, as a part of you, and as meaningful to your life.

And then a house of clay. The rich material that originates from the soil underneath us and is praised for its plasticity and flexibility, discovered thousands of years ago and used for ceramics. These two components are a perfect match in terms of thinking of a structure that is built to collapse and then resurrect again and again in new ways. A perpetual repetition that keeps expanding the notion of his images.

1. Martin D. Munk, "Resiliens mellem individ og livsform" in Slagmark, Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2016
2. Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936
3. In conversation with Gustafsson on 5 November 2023, about his way of working within the darkroom.
4. ibid.

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Another secret third thing
Elisa Medde

Photographs are fragments of space and time, flattened in two dimensions, always originating in some form of past and filtered through our perception. Single fractions of mementos, we often use them like words to build narratives and possibilities and create ecosystems of experiences.

Maybe one of the reasons behind our fascination with photo- graphs is due to the fact that we function in precisely the same way: we constantly live in the past — at best, trying to predict how things will unfold in the future, ultimately incapable of staying in the present. This is not so much of a philosophical or psychological fact as it is more of a biological one. Altogether, it takes about 140 milliseconds for our brains to receive the information our eyes are recording and process it cognitively. I recently read a fascinating study that demonstrated how our brains actually predict what could happen before the eyes can see, allowing us, amongst other things, to be able to catch a ball thrown towards us. Our brains, in fact, compensate for the delay in receiving processing information by predicting consequential moves: we do not exactly see the ball approaching us, but we are able to direct our hands in its direction because we can predict where it will be. Interestingly, our brains can even rewrite said information in case of mistakes — for example, if the ball sudden- ly changes direction. Our brains tell us that we did not actually see what we thought we saw, correcting the information. In other words, we constantly rewrite our own history.

When it comes to photography, the beautiful addition is that we can expose the process, observe it, and make it a part of our narrative, turning images into blossoming, living things. When specifically looking at analogue photography, there is a magic discrepancy in the nature of this latent image and in the way it can be activated during the darkroom work — starting with the time it takes to process it. Even when turned into a positive, something is essentially unfinished about it, still in progress. It can always be, at a later stage, altered, manipulated — or rewritten. Time can become nonlinear here. Factors such as depth, representation and reproduction become tools for experiencing a multitude of layers in depth and time, where the overlapping of addition and erasure within the single images effectively represents the internal timeline of creation and destruction that our perception constantly enacts.

This resonates profoundly with Erik Gustafsson's practice, and specifically with the photographs in A House of Clay.

The construction of a photograph here is only the first step in the construction of a visual sequence. The sequence then becomes a way of seeing, suggesting other ways of seeing, expanding narrative possibilities and becoming experience. When this form of engagement is self-reflexive, such visual narratives become an open-ended manuscript, where the story is life itself: seemingly chaotic, ever changing, a networked constellation of isolated moments. At times what we see clearly contains a great deal of indexical value, we understand the details, the environment and the conditions where this could have happened if only what we are looking at were true. In other instances, luminograms and abstractions are there to remind us about the space in between memory and oversight. Sometimes meaning is hidden in details, in the white space between the photographs on the gallery walls.

Memory is a complex construction and we mostly observe it via the artefacts we create. A House of Clay is no different. Often photographs absolve observational and self-referential duties in the construction of memory: photographs help somewhat in observing, understanding life, creating memories of it, which we can then sequence and rework so to relive it, experience it once again — but slightly altered. In the scrapbook of our minds we overlap and juxtapose, pair and separate, put together and rip apart all the bits and pieces, moments that possess added meaning, that constitute notes in the music sheet. They constantly oscillate between being records and wishes, building blocks and dreams, full and empty. Time feels pressured and outstretched, as if the whole sequence is in fact only unfolding during the time it takes for an eye to blink, or the shutter to open and close. The time it takes to pick up a frog in your hands before it jumps away. The images in this exhibition play with memory and perception alike in such a way that portraits, still lives and abstract images exchange roles often and trick us into repetitions and contrasts.

They more often than not are neither this nor that, but another secret third thing living in flux, defying transparency, thriving in opacity.