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Short presentation of the book "Handpicked- At excursions in the visual archive"

In 2009 The art academy in Gothenburg, Sweden, started a new education for art photographers called "The histories of photography" with "histories" in plural to underline that there is many different ways to relate photographs to time and context. The idea was that advanced students and visual artists would relate their art practices to different kinds of visual archive, and mainly photographic archives. There are hundreds of physical archives filled with old negatives and photographic prints, as well as a steadily increasing stream of digitalized images. We find visual archives on the internet and in collections and museums all over the world. How do we relate to this wealth of information?

Gothenburg is the second largest city in Sweden, and the art-academy attracts students from many countries. In the course "histories of photography" the students were one Swedish, one Danish and one German photographer, and one Norwegian visual artist originally trained as painter. The group worked together for one year as classmates, and then decided they wanted to continue the cooperation and make an exhibition and a book together.

During the year of study, the students had the opportunity to attend conferences with and get critique from some of the most respected theoreticians of photography history from England, France, USA and the Nordic countries. This was of course a great influence on us as students, and we thank our benefactors, The Nordic Culture Point, The City of Gothenburg, The Swedish Arts Council, our university and our teachers, as well as the Natural History Museum of Gothenburg that accepted our investigation of their photographic archive, and an exhibition in their museum. They even let us print images from their archives in our book that combines visual art and scientific investigation. A theoretical introduction to our theme, written in English by Frøydi Laszlo, is found on page 20- 29

The book starts with a documentation of the exhibition we made in the Natural History Museum of Gothenburg. The theme was the image of animals and nature in visual archive and museum. Two of us, Christine Sjöberg and Frøydi Laszlo, related directly to some of the more than 2000 images from the museums archive. (The latest entry in the book gives some more examples of the different kinds of images that may be found there, and the internet link for you if you want to explore this further on your own). **Christine**, who has even made the book cover, has worked with photographs from trophy hunts in Africa 1913-48, organized by the museum and its conservationists, to bring big mammals specially to be stuffed up and displayed in the museums collections. By blackening out the background of the photographs the animal itself becomes the central image, and provoking existential thoughts of life and death. In some way the animal shows a double capture or a doubled kind of death. The animal is captured and frozen in time as you photograph it in similar ways that if you hunt it, stuff it up and display it. But, never the less, the animal was once a breathing, living individual not just a representative of its species. In her text "unmoving and immortal" page 115- 130, Christine elaborates these arguments further. Most of the citations in her text are in English.

In the exhibition **Frøydi** showed a video film where a woman's hand is slowly turned into a dove's wing, and some slightly modified images from the museums archive

showing close-ups of a woman's hands doing taxidermy work. In addition to these images a set of false nails were displayed in the same fashion as the museum display beetles. This work discusses if the way the western mind looks at nature has to do with a culturally constructed image of men and women. In her text page 83-97, she discusses how images of nature become part of our memory and identity through the practice of creating personal archives through family photographs. Sometimes the natural conditions create the backdrop to the scene that constitutes the memory, sometimes the natural surroundings and weather conditions themselves are what we remember from a holiday or as what it was like to be a child. During the exhibition Frøydi even held a one day workshop for children called "The animal's shadows". The children worked with light and shadow in a dimly lit room filled with sheeps wool. The smell and touch of the wool was dominating the animal experience, in contrast to the way the visitor to the museum experience the animal exposed behind glass-, mostly by sight. See page 141-166

Two of us, Lars Dyrendom and Hendrik Zeitler, related images from other archives or their own contemporary images to the museum context. **Lars** worked with a Danish archive of business foundation "Hedeselskapet", in English DDH, that tells how the sour and barren soil of large areas of Denmark since 1866 was transformed into farmland through human intervention. The images show both hope and failure during this process. To choose from the archive was like a poetic work by it self. Many of these images had not been digitalized or reproduced, an example of the treasures that may be found, often hidden away in cardboard boxes, in all kinds of older archives. To go through the physical archive and to scan the images was an interesting but at times overwhelming work for Lars. How do we choose images for a personal interpretation from a wealth of information? What makes an image stand out from the others, from the mass of the archive? These images are all from the early years of the work initiated by the DDH, and all part of their archive (see page 169-189). For the exhibition Lars made a videofilm where the sound of voices reading a poetic text is interwoven with the images.

Hendrik worked with the image of an underprivileged suburban area named "Hammarkullen" and how it has hitherto been presented in official and artistic photography, mostly as a problem area. Hendrik doesn't document the daily life in itself but traces of human activities, as he has come across them, while walking his dog in the forested areas surrounding the local apartment buildings. The images are not constructed, not artificially lit or enhanced digitally in post production. See page 229-245. Hendrik has a past as classic nature photographer, but halfway through this career he started to doubt the authenticity of the image that was constructed. On page 16-19 he shows the "truth behind the scene" from a travel specially planned for nature photographs, where all photographers were routinely advised for the best angle to make the perfect image of a grand scenery, and where the famous white headed eagle was best to be found right behind the local slaughterhouse that let them feed on their scraps. Hendrik still uses his classical skills in his photography, but now to tell about contemporary society rather than to construct an image of nature as eternal or unchanging.

To contrast with our own work and to deepen the argumentation on the topic of animals and nature, the four of us together with the museum invited five scientists to hold lectures and contribute to the book. **Anna Samuelsson**, page 33-58, holds a Ph.D in

Sociology and, on background of analyses of animal displays in natural history museums in Sweden and England writes about how the expositions, from the earliest days of curiosa displays until today, are formed by the cultural context of it's day. An example is the habit of displaying birds and mammals in "family groups" where the female is presented as nursing or nesting and the male as defending the family group, although this may be seen as an idealization of human, Christian family values more than a true image of how animals survive in nature. The images are mostly from the displays in Museum of Natural History Stockholm, and photographed by Hendrik Zeitler.

Liv Emma Thorsen is a Norwegian researcher and professor in cultural history at the university of Oslo. On the pages 99-113 she uses texts and images from the archive of the Gothenburg museum of natural history as well as from other sources to reconstruct what is known of the life history of the big, male, walrus now shown in the museum. She even tells the history of the stuffed animal and the different ways it has been displayed since it entered the museum in 1928. Her text both concerns the way that traditional natural history leaves out the individual biographic facts of the single animal life, as well as pointing to the animal as a sign for values in societies and not just a neutral "thing". On page 131- 139 Icelandic artist and researcher **Bryndis Snaebjörnsdottir** in cooperation with English artist **Mark Wilson**, documents an attempt to communicate with wild seals at the north coast of Iceland. The seals seem to show curiosity towards humans, but still keep at a distance. They cannot be teased to enter into any closer form for dialogue. At the same time a local farmer bottle feeds a seal cub probably abandoned by it's mother. The cub is to be released back into the wild. The work questions if the inter- species communication between humans and animals can be held with true respect for the animals themselves, or if the human perspective will always be in our way. **Tyrone Martinson** shows images and reflections made on an expedition to the arctic Svalbard. The expedition tried to re-photograph images made in the 1860's to- 80's to show the melting shorelines of the glacial north. See page 191-211. The article even includes images from the American south western desertland prior to colonization, and discusses how these images has taken part in the construction of the idea of the "Wilderness" as something noble but to be conquered. "The scientific excursion and the fieldwork has a long tradition of building archives and collections as well as producing empirical facts to generate scientific knowledge" says Tyrone. " Our understanding of our world and natural processes are built on such fundaments, and still important in our days of climate change" The expedition found evidence of both glaciers melting and what seems like increased death of younger ice bears, probably due to starvation. This concerns Tyrone deeply throughout the text. Which images and histories of the arctic are we leaving for our future generations? Tyrone has earlier researched the images of the great hopes and tragic failure of the Andréé North Pole Balloon Expedition in 1897, photographed by the expedition's photographer Nils Strindberg. The expedition stranded on a small arctic island without reaching it's destination, and the crew survived for some time before freezing to death. The remains of the expedition as well as some negatives for photographs were found deep frozen in 1930.

Both the texts of Bryndis/Mark and Tyrone are written in English.

In addition to the contribution from these scientists, we even invited two more graduate students in photography from the Gothenburg art academy, as their art fitted well in with the theme of our book. **Peo Olsson** page 61-81 documented the closing down of the Natural History Museum of Lund, Sweden. The total archive and objects of the museum are now stored away in cool and secure storage spaces, no longer accessible to public. Peo writes about the archive as the space made both for things to be organized, catalogued, and to be hid away-, forgotten. His short and poetic text, together with the images, point to a concept that

he calls “the structural amnesia”

Frida Klingberg page 213-227, takes up her relation to an animal hated by many in Sweden, the wolf. The first part of the images “the forest behind my back” are automatically photographed by a wildlife sensor camera as she carries it on her back walking through a forest known to be wolf territory. She then sleeps one night on the ground in the territory, and then the camera is in night mode and reacting to movement. Each time she turns in her sleep, or if she wakes up, a flash goes off and an image is made. Frida sleeps lightly, dreaming of wolves....The images of pastoral landscapes and sheep are linked to interviews with the farmers using this land, and their experiences of encounters with wolves. With these different images and stories Frida tries to make a nuanced impression of her attempt of being close to the wolf, the animal in it self, and not only it’s romanticised, popularized public image.

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The best of wishes
Fröydi Laszlo, publisher

