

PURITY AND DANGER

Reflections on Åsa Cederqvist's artistic excavations

by Camilla Larsson

The exhibition commences right at the entrance to the gallery with a heavy, rhythmical beat. Dance music pours out of one of the side rooms. I find myself drawn in that direction and I pass through a larger gallery containing a number of works of art - sculptures, visual images and applications made using a variety of techniques. Sculptures hang or rest on the floor in one corner of the room - *Materialist Ritual* - poles covered with textile sheaths with patterns that are reminiscent of layers dug from different strata of the earth. On the walls there are photographs of painted cave walls printed on textiles. A larger textile application - *Mother Earth* - demonstrates schematically what the earth consists of in terms of substances. The sensuous fabric variously coloured in skin-pink, beige and leopard spots fills a triangle taken from a scientific diagram. Together the various works form a species of abstract, atavistic landscape, a place for rituals that we have long since forgotten.

In one side room we encounter a film entitled *Civilization - The Pleasure Principle*. The camera almost seems to lick the brown sludge that is slowly and hypnotically stirred round and round and round. The documentary imagery of the film conflicts with a tape loop that speaks directly to the bodily sensation of a sweaty dance floor in the small hours. The sludge portrayed in the film is both seductive and playful. It reminds me of how children play with clay and mud at the same time that I realize that the work has something to do with a sewage-treatment plant and with revulsion. In the other side room at the gallery, in dialogue with a semi-demolished wall, there is another film - *The Quest of Presence*. The music and the mood of the film are different, but there is still an evident collision between the way the camera registers and what is actually taking place in the room portrayed on the film. We become witnesses to an event - a group of people performing a liberating dance - and then an obvious break. A spectacle successively reveals itself as both tempting embarrassment and the desire to laugh. The film moves between a documentary style and a colourful and scenographically innovative setting in which a number of queer figures appear. Both videos are informed by a material visuality that testifies to Åsa Cederqvist's sculptural and scenographic leanings in working with moving images. Back in the main room of the gallery I encounter her sculpture entitled (*The Fountain*) *Stockholm Water* in which she links up with the gallery's water supply. She invites us to taste the pure water that so many people in the world lack access to. The most absolute purity is to be found in *A Certain Ambiguity* in which an overly large, patchouli-scented bar of soap has been placed on a podium and covered with a thin textile veil as though it

were some precious fetish. Something pure, delicate and seductive meets up with a repulsively filthy domain. Purity meets danger.

Purity and danger are not merely a theme round which Åsa Cederqvist's new series of artworks orbit. They are also the title of an influential study from the 1960s by anthropologist Mary Douglas. For me, the exhibition entitled *Excavation* demonstrates how Åsa Cederqvist, both concretely and intellectually, dives into and reflects upon the subject. The anthropological perspective is combined with an artistic "excavation". The exhibition makes me think of the obsession in our own time with moving and expelling dirt in order to maintain a controlled and unified culture of cleanliness. How can we understand dirt as such? In Mary Douglas's cultural analysis, the way we perceive and deal with dirt is an important key to understanding how cultures work. Douglas has taught us that dirtiness is not dependent on the artefact itself but on where it is to be found. Thus dirt is something relative. Dirt is everything that cannot be contained in an ordered system - mistakes, deviations and oddities - which must be suppressed. The title *Excavation* points towards Åsa Cederqvist's revealing of issues and materials that are taboo to us but which she uses as her artistic materials.

What is the state of dirt today? Bodily waste has to be taken away, hidden from view and dissolved. We have toilet bowls and sewage systems. Fat is to be driven from our bodies. Fat in foodstuffs and in restaurants has to be separated from other waste and dissolved. Emotional chaos and hysteria have to be dealt with in therapy. Aesthetically certain forms and expressions are degraded into kitsch. Taken together this forms the raw materials for Åsa Cederqvist's new works of art. We discover the "dirty, impure and dangerous" in fat that has been transformed into soap, in the sludge of the sewer and in the tense bodies that need to be liberated. But Åsa Cederqvist shows it all as though viewed in a distorting mirror since she also persuades us to delight in what is repulsive and strange.

Why are things that are dirty taboo? If we asked Mary Douglas she would argue that we create taboos in order to deal with and regulate what is dirty so that this does not represent a threat to our culture. We create strict boundaries so that we can maintain order. She develops this idea in her book *Purity and Danger* where she explains that

"the danger lies in the state of transition because it is here that both the preceding and the succeeding states cannot be defined. A person who has to pass from one state to the other finds herself in danger and represents a danger to others."

In the creation of taboos there is another, more challenging and productive force. Mary Douglas further argues that while

disorder destroys any hope of a pattern forming, it also provides the raw material for new patterns. What is disordered thus symbolizes danger but it can also represent power. Disorder has an unlimited potential for forming new patterns. For this reason, people who find themselves in a boundary area are considered to have unimagined powers. The artist can be just such a force that is able to ignore taboos and to act on the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable.

Cleanliness and dirt predicate each other just as though they represent opposing poles. In Åsa Cederqvist's art they are enabled to share the same platform as, precisely, an uncontrolled force. I reflect on the notion that Åsa Cederqvist's art is like the transitions that Mary Douglas talks about. Her artworks are like transitions that dissolve their own boundaries, something that reminds me of Freud's introduction to *Civilization and its Discontents*. Freud speaks here of our origins as an "oceanic sensibility" which was part of our human existence before we developed an organized civilization which forced us to repress our instincts, aggression, and sexual desire by creating taboos. The "oceanic" represents an original state that we long for and that we surrendered when we separated from our mothers. But it is also a condition that threatens to devour and dissolve us. Our longing for life is exchanged for a death drive. Many people associate this state of there being no boundaries with guilt and anxiety while others emphatically embrace it.

If one is to point to a single overall principle to the exhibition it would be movement - movement in the gallery, movement between the works and movement within each individual work. Let me give some concrete examples in order to clarify my thoughts. There is movement, indeed, in her film *Civilization - The Pleasure Principle* with its roving camera and pumping effluent. The drilling cores remind us of movement deep in the earth in *Materialist Ritual*; while the bodies move spastically in *The Quest of Presence*. There is also movement in the room in the frame that has been constructed, like a stage set, leading visitors to the films. Åsa Cederqvist invites us to let go and to drift through the exhibition which, almost schizophrenically, operates simultaneously on different levels - from proximity of hand to material, through to something that might be described as artistic environmental-activism. We are given the opportunity to engage closely with materials such as textile fabrics, yarn, plastic, soap and water at the same time that we are confronted with questions about the taboos of our own era, our fixations and the threats to our environment. The flock-surfaced plastic objects that make up the sculpture *Into the Wilderness*, for example, remind us of the new barrier reefs that are being created in our oceans. In the sculpture, plastic bottles have been transformed into a totem that emblematically testifies to the threats to our earth. We are faced with a schizophrenic dispute when political consciousness is aestheticized. Åsa Cederqvist refuses to take sides. An object can have both an

extravagant appearance and a serious content. She simply cannot refrain from clothing a serious message in a more frivolous costume. The notion of "camp" comes to mind - a sensibility that turns conventional hierarchies of taste upside down and that refuses to make a clear political statement. Rather, camp embraces "bad taste". Camp expression offers art and life a different regime. Things that are exaggerated and "different" form a lodestar and upset our usual way of seeing things.

To me the exhibition speaks with numerous artists from history. There are similarities to many land artists of the 1970s who worked with the oil crisis as a political backdrop. Earth and organic materials were subjected to artistic treatment both in galleries and elsewhere. I am also reminded of the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta who alternated between earth art, performance and body art. She researched her own links to the earth via the naked body and bodily fluids like blood. Or Joseph Beuys who worked with the energies in fat and in felt fabrics. The materials were an important aspect of the transformation process that Beuys went through during his metamorphosis from fighter pilot to artist. Why not regard *Excavation* as a parallel type of transformation in that Åsa Cederqvist moves from one subject to the other making use of charged materials that, in turn, charge the issues.

Åsa Cederqvist has long been interested in what cannot be controlled, where there are no boundaries, things that are banished and schizophrenic. Such phenomena provided a central subject for the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995). The many similarities between them caused me to speculate. What would an encounter between the two look like? Consider the following imaginary scenario. The encounter would probably start off with free associations in order to ensure that all the mechanisms of censorship had been removed - as though both parties were suffering from Tourette's syndrome. Åsa Cederqvist would then commence a liberating dance while Gilles Deleuze took a closer look at the exhibition. He would hasten from work to work and, at times, would stop for a moment and exclaim: "Yes indeed", or some such phrase. He would, quite simply, remind one of Professor Challenger who appears in Gilles Deleuze's lecture entitled "10,000 B.C.: The Geology of Morals (Who Does The Earth Think It Is?)". The figure of Professor Challenger is borrowed, in turn, from the novelist Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Challenger is a demented professor who delivers lectures on the earth, defining a species of geo-philosophy. In Gilles Deleuze's lecture the professor is held responsible for founding a discipline with numerous names: "rhizomatics, schizoanalysis, nomadology, micropolitics, pragmatics, the science of multiplicity". The names resonate through the gallery and are tinted by Åsa Cederqvist's images, sculptures and films.

Deleuze approaches the earth with the conviction that it is the only true and universal item. But as we shall see, his

understanding of the earth is by no means constant and immutable but, rather, something that is constantly in the process of becoming. The earth is an entity constructed of layers of sediment, so-called strata. Simply put, stratification - the fact that the earth is built up from a number of strata - is a picture of how the earth is populated by human beings and their civilizations and cultures. Each stratum forms areas, territories and societies. Each such society draws up boundaries that keep people in or exclude them. The earth's problem is this process of stratification; a process of defining limits and policies as we know them in human guise. What the earth strives to achieve is, on the contrary, to dissolve its territories - an opposite process of de-territorialization. Thus the earth is in a constant state of becoming and it never solidifies in a final form.

Gilles Deleuze and Åsa Cederqvist, in their respective praxes, are hunting for the poetry of the earth that can liberate us. During their discussion they conclude that it is not the earth that we humans need to save. For the earth is only experimenting our human societies with their environmental degradation as "itching tattoos" on the surface of its huge body. The artist and the philosopher conclude that we need, rather, to free ourselves from our very human notion that we are the crowning glory of the created world and, instead, to seek an alliance with the earth. Because it may well be that the earth will actually be our salvation.

If there was a policy for the earth it would be, according to Deleuze, the notion of stratification and de-territorialisation. I note myself, that if the earth had an aesthetic it would be Åsa Cederqvist's artistic exploration that we meet in *Excavation*.

Camilla Larsson
Stockholm
February 2013

Camilla Larsson is an exhibition curator and author. Since 2006 she has been a curator at Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm. She has a background in art history and museology and has also studied feminist philosophy. As a freelance critic she writes for leading Swedish newspapers and art magazines and has also contributed articles to the Polish periodical *Objec* and the Dutch publication *Foam Magazine*.

Further reading:

Against Interpretation and Other Essays, Susan Sontag, 1964; *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, 1987; *Deleuze and Space*, Ian Buchanan & Gregg Lambert (Eds.), 2005; *Materialet, Geniet och Det Osynliga Kontraktet*, Åsa Cederqvist, Sara Kaaman and Martin Falck (Eds.), 2012; *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas, 1966; *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud, 1995 (1930).