



More Films About Songs, Cities and Circles

What happened!?! Artist Johanna Billing talks about trying to grasp transforming societies, charged silences and how her films start out as songs and images in her head.



Kvartssamtal, photo 1994

Helena Selder: Why did you become an artist?

Johanna Billing: Drawing was my favourite subject in school. But becoming an artist wasn't an obvious choice to me from the beginning. I grew up in Jönköping, where there wasn't anywhere you could go to do life drawing. It's funny; because that's really where the "do-it-yourself" mentality started that I guess has been a part of everything I've done since. I stood at home, drawing my models. In school, when nobody saw me, I stole clay and modelling stands and sat home doing model studies without a model. Then I applied to art schools with my sculptures and was admitted to one in Stockholm. One of the reasons why I started making art was actually that I was interested in so many different things. I wrote, I was interested in music, history, social science, philosophy and all of those things more or less to the same extent. But when I had to choose an education for a career I suddenly panicked. Choosing art became a way of not deciding. Art became a way of taking in all of it. It was simply about choosing a way that left things more open.

HS: You later applied to Konstfack, the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm as a sculptor but ended up working with photography and film. How did that come about?

JB: I went to both Nyckelviken and Örebro Art School and made sculptures and was completely set on doing that. When I got into Konstfack I was working with a kind of furniture-like sculptures. I wanted to get into a school so that someone would put me against the wall –or something would happen so that I could develop. I was aware that what I was doing was work samples. When I started at the Konstfack in 1994, we had no teachers, and a professor who was never there. We had nobody we could talk to and a lot of our time was spent getting the situation to work as best we could.

But there were some good projects at the school at that time. Among other things Ebba Matz and Carin Ellberg had a project called "What I really want to do". I tried to ask myself that question and answer it as honestly as I could. What I really wanted to do was to have a discussion about what I was doing – but there were no teachers. I decided to set up a situation – I called it "**Kvartssamtal**" (Quarter conference – a 15 minute talk between student and teacher about the student's progress). I set up all of my sculptures, models, paintings, contact sheets and ideas for installations on a table and invited the other six in my class to come in one by one. I wanted a situation where things were connected; – Where do you come from? – What do you do? They were invited to sit there and question things. When we were done with our projects we were supposed to exhibit them. Each of us had our own stall in the school's main exhibition space. I showed the documentation from "**Kvartssamtal**", which looked like quite dry photographs of interrogations. In spite of there being almost no information, I noticed that people at the school understood just by the title, the photographs and who was in them what the work was about. For the first time I had done something that meant something, both to me and for others. Something that was real, that had to do with reality. Somehow I had come in the back way. It may have been a social project but I had no idea about that. I wasn't interested in doing anything social; I just wanted to get on with my sculptures. But by doing it I had caught on to something – my God, this is what I'm going to do! Trusting what was around me was interesting enough.

HS: It was an early insight!

JB: Yes, that was good, but it's something you have to return to and keep updating all the time to be able to continue experimenting.



Graduate Show, video still 1999



What Else Do You Do? video still 2001

HS: You came from Jönköping to Konstfack and you seem to have felt a pressure to do well. For your graduate exhibition in 1999 you made the film "**Graduate Show**" – a project where the graduating students were offered dance lessons during their last semester. The students practiced together and then you made a film with a dance that you had rehearsed. On one level the film is about how important it is for the students to perform and succeed when they graduate.

JB: Yes, that film and almost everything I do is informed by some idea of achieving. I always come back to that. It has to do with a "do-it-yourself" way of thinking where you don't go to what is being served – instead you try to find your own way of doing things. But it also has to do with feeling guilty when I started out in art. I thought it was the ultimate self-fulfilment, the most "ego" thing imaginable and for that reason so embarrassing and futile. That changed with "**Kvartssamtal**" where I invited others so I could go outside myself and create a dialogue. But this thing about achieving started out being about us at Konstfack and my own problem with my role as an artist. When we got out of school I suddenly saw how much society had changed and that it wasn't only artists who were involved with self-fulfilment. Suddenly everybody is doing the same thing. Not only do so many people want to become artists– whatever you do self-fulfilment is somehow included and everybody has the same amount of anxiety about performing; being happy, having the right relationship, the right home, the right career. Compared to the rest of society, the artist's role isn't as egocentric as it used to be. On the other hand, that's not such a funny thing to discover. Maybe my work is a kind of – hey, what happened?!



Missing Out, video stills 2001

HS: The films you made when you had graduated (“Project for a Revolution”, 2000, “Missing Out”, 2001, “What Else Do You Do?”, 2001) were strongly based around people and environments here in Stockholm. Has there been a big difference these last few years when you’ve been working almost exclusively abroad?

JB: The difference is not that great. If you compare the films you named to the films I’ve made abroad; “Where She Is At” (2001), “Look Out!” (2003), “Magic and Loss” (2003), “Magical World” (2005) they are basically about the same things. Everything is about a society that is changing and people in it. Do you notice the changes over time? Are you aware of what you are in the midst of? When I show my Swedish films abroad, they are about just that. But if I try to do something that is about Sweden or Stockholm and show it here, it becomes too close. You see the films as if they were about my friends and me. But the films are not about my friends but about things that can be difficult to capture and put into words. The films help me to see these things.

HS: In the film “Where She Is At” that you shot in Oslo (Moderna Muséet project in collaboration with Oslo Konsthall, 2001) these slippery, difficult things crystallize and come out very clearly. The film shows a woman hesitating at the top of a diving tower and both the title and the film itself are about how one feels, where one is in life.

JB: I happened to be in this place “Ingierstrandsbadet” that is an old bath and recreational facility with a restaurant and diving tower outside Oslo. Everybody was talking about us having to go there because it was so fantastic and was probably going to be torn down. I became interested since everything in Sweden that was built in the 1930’s and



Project For A Revolution,
production photos Johanna Löwenhamn 2000



Where She Is At, video stills 2001

40’s in a modernist vein has a high priority for us. It is really what we see and appreciate as our heritage and we would never tear it down just like that. I thought about how important it was, when Ingierstrand was built, that everyone should have access to recreation and nature, even the people living in the inner city. But apparently it’s not important anymore. When I was out there I was thinking about all this while I was watching this quiet drama unfold with the girl alone at the top of the diving tower. Standing there alone with this decision whether to jump or not. It’s really an individual “performance”, a decision, an achievement. She stands on a tower in the shape of an “F” that becomes a symbol for all of the old functionalist, modernist, ideas. What the political parties agree about; the great ideas; the direction a country takes – do they have any relation to the individual? I think these things are difficult to get a grip on and talk about. But in a film like this you can connect things and look at them. Maybe it engages a physical understanding that gives you a feeling you can take with you and think about for a longer period.

HS: You were invited in a similar way by Milch (an independent art platform based in London) to make a film in London. Can you tell me a little about “Look Out!” (Gainsborough Studios, London, 2003) where we follow a group of youths who visit some of the new flats in a luxury development in their neighbourhood.

JB: What was interesting was the difference compared to my earlier films. I had worked in places where development has a slower pace. I thought that was interesting because it can be difficult to feel it. You notice it after a few years and then you think –How drastic! It’s a small, small change every day. The Social Democrats in Sweden for

example, aren't what they were, but still you vote for them and think that they're the same party that they've always been. The difference in London, and especially East London, which has had the most extreme development the last few years, is that the changes are so tremendous, which is probably because there's so much money and greater social and economic differences in the UK. I was attracted to doing something that would reflect this but wondered how I could do something where everything changes so fast that it would already be old the first time it was shown. I was invited to exhibit at Gainsborough Studios, an old film studio from the fifties where Hitchcock made his films. Gainsborough Studios is as big as a whole block and was just being developed into luxury flats. The housing company also financed an exhibition space in order to be allowed to keep the name "Gainsborough Studios". One way for me to comment on the situation was to go in and use the building as the film studio it originally was, but also try to show what was happening in the building. At the time, it was house shows for prospective buyers. What I also wanted to connect to this, were my first feelings when I walked around in the area. There were lots of signs on the walls of the buildings about the developments in the area along the lines of "New luxury flats planned here" and, next to them, signs asking people to come and help at local youth centres. Before the refurbishment, Gainsborough Studios had housed a non-profit music school named "Young, Gifted and Broke" after Nina Simone's classic "Young, Gifted and Black". There were clearly some very guilty feelings around. The building lies next to Shoreditch Park, which in 2003 was very run-down. At the other end of the park there was a little canal that was in the prospectus for the flats, which advertised views of the park and the canal. The flats themselves were luxurious

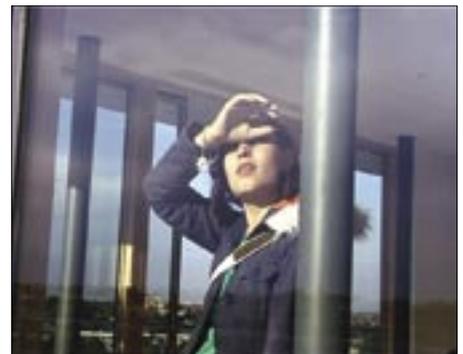
glass cubes, but the views showed all the problems in the surrounding neighbourhood.

HS: That Park was full of drug-addicts.

JB: Yes and during the time I was there, there were several murders. The developers at Gainsborough Studios kept saying they would help youths in the neighbourhood. How? By cleaning up the park? That would only move the problem somewhere else. To be able to comment on this I arranged staged flat shows. Above all, I wanted to invite young people from the area to come up and look at the flats to see what they were like inside and to see their neighbourhood from that perspective. It became almost like an educational visit. I think I was playing with the idea that it could almost be something that the developers could come up with to help local youths – a kind of misguided and totally illogical youth activity. You won't see it in the film, except that they look a little too young to be in the position to actually purchase a flat. But just by attending a viewing they have, at least formally, a chance.

HS: You boil down a tendency, something in the air, into a situation and then you channel that through people who often have a connection to that situation. It becomes a way of concretising this zeitgeist and making it manifest.

JB: I would never want it to become a generalisation. I prefer to invite people and explain to them what I am interested in. After that it becomes their improvisation that we follow. Something that happens and not something that I direct. I think a lot of things come out even if the people don't talk. It's hard to believe – one doesn't usually give



Look Out! video stills 2003



Magic & Loss, film stills 2005

people the freedom just to “be” in a film, but I really feel I get a lot out of it. Especially when trying to work with things that are hard to pin point or verbalise.

HS: It’s very telling how one of these youngsters in the film impatiently walks up to the sink and turns on one of the elegantly designed taps.

JB: Yes, they’re a little bit uncomfortable. I want to make films where there is a constant activity. With people who are occupied with something, maybe not what they usually do but something that they’ve been made to do. That makes them think about why and how they’re doing it and in what situation. Then we watch it and maybe we think about the same things. When then the film is projected large in a room, a physical communication is created. I want to make films that are constantly sliding between different positions. At first the film might resemble fiction film because it has a cinematic quality. Then it turns into a documentary, but suddenly it gets theatrical and then once again it changes into something that seems to be a documentation of a performance. You can’t really relax and think– ok I’m watching a film and now I’m going to focus on the plot. I want all these layers to be active all the time. It’s like a camera that keeps zooming back and forth failing to find its focus. It’s sometimes hard to make films like that because you frustrate the audience by not serving them anything “finished”. On the other hand maybe they’re films about frustration.

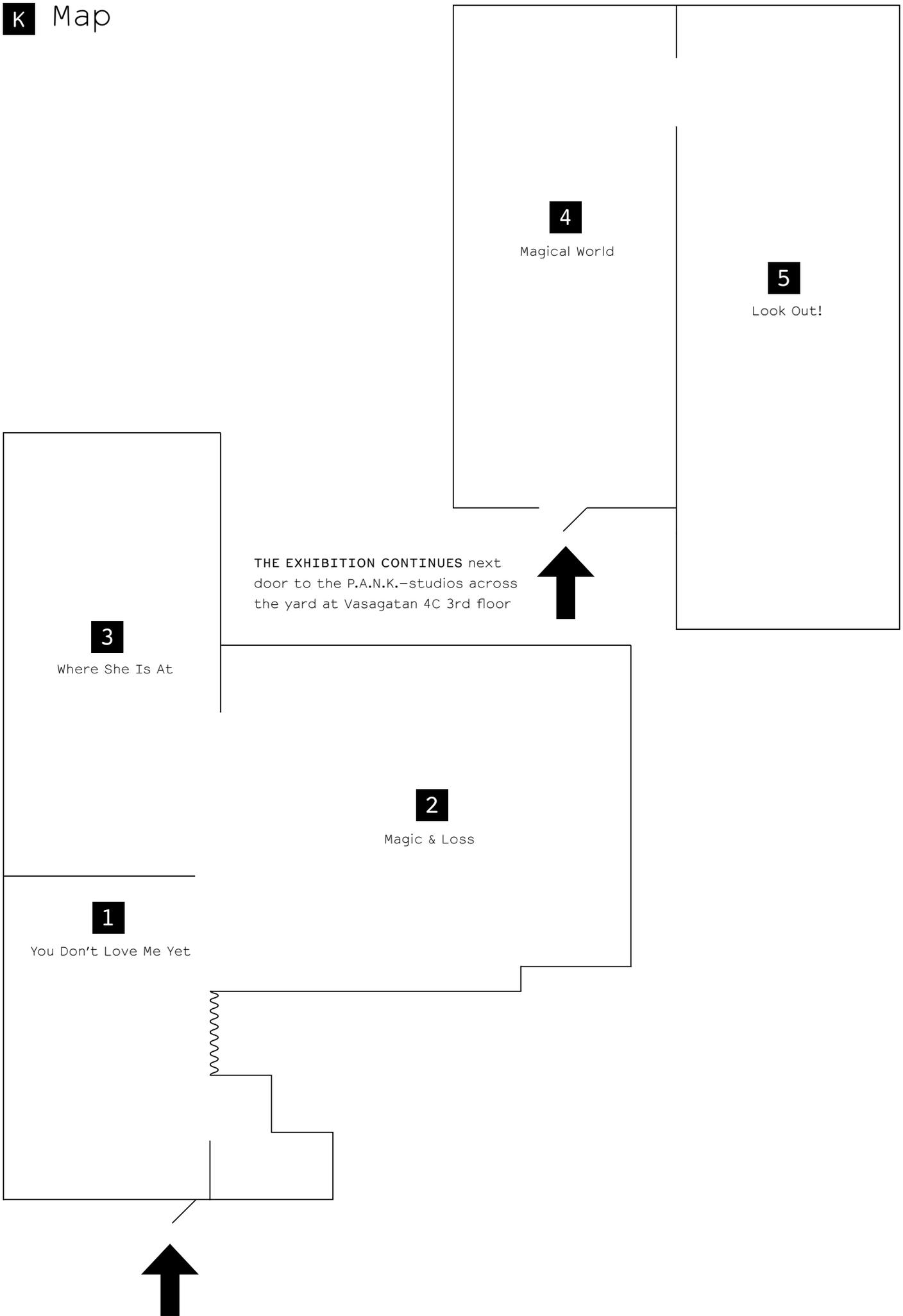
HS:You made “Magic and Loss” (2005) on invitation from Dutch “Smart Project Space” and shot it on location in Amsterdam. It’s, if possible, even more open ended and abstract than “Look Out! In the film we follow a group of people as they pack up somebody’s apartment.

JB: Well, it’s a sort of choreography and it’s very formalistic in that way. At the same time it’s a documentation of something that is actually happening. From the beginning I had the title of the Lou Reed album; “Magic and Loss” from 1992, as a working title. He released the record after a period when several of his friends had passed away. I had it in mind in the beginning of the process of the film because I first started to think about it when I was invited to create a work for an exhibition about the sinking of the M/S Estonia*, that focused on disappearance. I started to think about, quite practically, what happens when there are large-scale catastrophes like the Estonia. It’s not only one or two people missing; it’s entire families, circles of friends and whole communities. Strangers without that nostalgic relationship arrive to pack up the deceased persons’ homes. I got obsessed with the idea and I was curious to see what it would look like. While I was thinking about it, the Estonia exhibition was cancelled. That only made it easier for me to really go on and explore this isolated event of the ongoing packing and the relationship between the people and the objects being packed.

When the exhibition was cancelled I was in Amsterdam and as I was there I started to think about how it could be relevant there. All the Dutch people around me kept talking about flats, changing, moving and improving the situation of living. I’ve read that Sweden tops the list of countries with the highest amount of single households per capita, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the Netherlands came in second.

* M/S Estonia was a big passenger ship that travelled between Sweden and Estonia. It sank at sea taking nearly 900 passengers with it in 1994.

K Map



1**You Don't Love Me Yet**

2003, DVD, 07:43 min

Photography: Manne Lindwall
 Musical arrangement: Ida Lundén
 (original version written by Roky Erickson
 1984)
 Recorded and mixed by Pontus Olsson,
 Atlantis Studio, Stockholm, June 2003
 Produced by Index in cooperation with
 Nifca

You Don't Love Me Yet was both a film recorded in Stockholm in 2003 and a tour that was organised by Johanna Billing and Index (The Swedish Foundation for Contemporary Art) in Stockholm 2002–2005. Twenty artists were invited to perform a cover of Roky Erickson's You Don't Love Me Yet from 1984 during an evening at Index. Performing a cover means paying a tribute to another artists by creating your own interpretation of a song – a test of the artists ability to maintain his or her identity while performing somebody's else song. The concert was repeated in 15 different cities with a resulting 150 versions of the song that will be available at Marabouparken annex for screening. The film You Don't Love Me Yet depicts a group of artists performing the song together in a recording studio in Stockholm.

You Don't Love Me Yet

Tour 2002–2005: DVD documentation from the live tour where local bands and artists perform Roky Erickson's song "You Don't Love Me Yet"

Index, Stockholm Oct 4 2002
 Eskilstuna Art Museum, Eskilstuna Aug 23 2003
 Norrköping Art Museum, Norrköping
 Sep 27 2003
 Tingshuset, Östersund Oct 4 2003
 Frieze Art Fair, London Oct 8 2003
 Vara Consert House, Vara Nov 9 2003
 Bar Alahuone, Helsingfors Dec 4 2003
 Sjömanskyrkan, Gävle Dec 6 2003
 Ystad Art Museum, Ystad Jan 24 2004
 Vedanta Gallery, Chicago Apr 30 2004
 Milton Keynes Gallery, Milton Keynes UK
 March 15 2005
 Festival a/d Werf, Utrecht, March 19 2005
 Festival Boulevard, Hertogenbosch Aug 5 2005
 De VeenFabriek, Leiden 27/11, 2005

2**Magic & Loss**16 mm film transferred to DVD,
16:52 min/loop

Film photography: Nina da Costa
 B-photography: Bas Tiele
 Sound: Marjo Postma
 Music: Karl-Jonas Winqvist
 Produced in cooperation with Smart Project
 Space
 Production assistants: Astrid Schumacher
 and Mutaleni Nadimi-Mbumba with support
 from the Swedish Art Grants Committee.

In Magic and Loss, recorded in Amsterdam 2005, a group of people silently pack up what seems to be a pleasantly furnished single household. A slow methodical choreography develops in their filling cartons and hoisting down furniture into the street. In these strangers' mechanical handling of someone's personal belongings, a number of questions and associations about the absent occupier of the flat present themselves.

3**Where She Is At**

2001, DVD 07:35 min/loop

Photography: Henry Moore Selder
 Filmed at Ingierstrand, Oslo, 2001
 Produced by Moderna Museet Project in
 cooperation with Oslo Kunsthall

Where She Is At was filmed at the Ingierstrand baths outside Oslo in 2001. In the film a woman's quiet struggle with herself on the diving tower is brought together with the fate of a recreational facility threatened with closure. Will she dare to jump? Will the baths be closed? Will today's Norway take the step and leave the old ideas of fresh air and recreation for all behind? The film is looped and we are forced to follow her painful hesitance over and over again.

4**Magical World**

2005, DVD, 06:12 min/loop

Photography: Manne Lindwall
 Musical arrangement; Petra Jezutkovic
 (Original version written by Sidney Barnes
 1968, Chevis Music publishing corp, BMI)
 Produced in cooperation with WHW and
 Rooseum
 Production assistant: Sonja Boric

Magical World, recorded in Zagreb in 2005, shows a children's orchestra rehearsing Rotary Connection's Magical World from 1968. The camera moves between the music room and the worn surroundings of the culture centre outside Zagreb, in a Croatia whose hurry to adapt to the rest of "normal" European threatens its own culture. In forced and newly learned English, a young Croatian boy sings the enigmatic and defiant first lines; "Why do you want to wake me from such a beautiful dream?...Can't you see that I am sleeping?... We live in a Magical World..."

5**Look Out!**

2003, DVD, 05:20 min/loop

Photography: Henry Moore Selder
 Recorded at Gainsborough Studios, London,
 2003
 Produced by Milch, London

Look Out, which was filmed in Shoreditch in East London in 2003, records the contrast between a run-down and poor neighbourhood and the housing development then taking place at old Gainsborough Film Studios. The camera follows a group of youths from the area on a tour of one of the luxury flats for prospective buyers. A strange atmosphere develops as they examine and test the sober furnishings and gaze out over their run-down and crime-riddled neighbourhood in this cross between a field trip and house-show.

It's possible economically and it's something that people view as something positive. While walking around Amsterdam you see a lot of these big hooks that are used when people move houses. You are constantly made aware of all the people moving because of the sort of public play that is enacted with the hook, the ladders and the machines. The lowering of furniture became a nice ingredient in the film once it had been moved and took place in Amsterdam.

HS: You once said that your films start as images, dreams or songs that you've thought about for some time before you start to construct a work around them. **"Magical World"** was shot in a cultural centre outside Zagreb and is connected to the song **"Magical World"**. The film depicts a group of children, as they're about to rehearse that song.

JB: Yes, **"Magical World"**, was a song which had been with me for many years that suddenly popped up in my head when I was on a residency in Croatia during autumn 2004. When I was there I was invited by the group WHW (What How and for Whom) to be a part of **"Normalisation"**, an exhibition about the hurried adjustment to the European Union that Croatia is undergoing. I had travelled before in Albania, Serbia and Romania, but not in Croatia. I don't think it was a coincidence that this song appeared but I wasn't sure that it would be relevant there and then. I had an image in my mind and I felt that I had to bring it out to understand it. I heard, instead of the singer Minnie Riperton of the original version, a young boy singing the solo chorus.

Magical World was recorded by a group called Rotary Connection and written by Sidney Barnes in 1968. It's interesting because it seems very personal but I also think it's a song about transformation. Min-

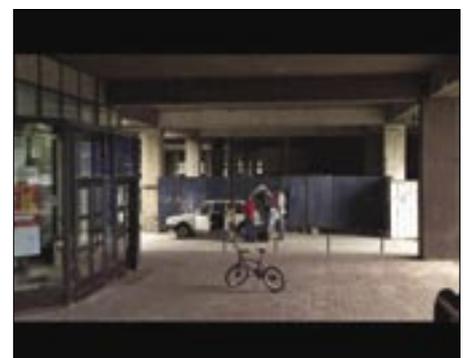


nie Riperton sings – Why do you want to wake me from this dream – I'm not interested. There's a very sad feeling in the song and at the same time it's got a very proud and cocky "Don't come here trying to change me – I am who I am" – attitude. What is also interesting is that when it was released, Rotary Connection was one of the first pop/rock bands with black and white members. Their music wasn't explicitly political but in retrospect it has become political just by being by a mixed group who made all these personal songs about change in a time of great upheavals. I was interested in the possibility of being able to express something personal with a voice of one's own in the midst of a rapid course of events.

The song is performed by a group of children in a cultural centre in Dubrava outside Zagreb. The building was designed by one of the experts of similar cultural centres in former Yugoslavia and the construction was initiated under an economically prosperous period during the eighties. When war broke out the architect moved to Africa and started up a new career. The centre still isn't finished and is basically falling apart.

I perceive this situation to be particular to Croatia; when independence came, one system was changed for another over night. For many this was a traumatic process where everything old, without discernment, was tossed out. When I arrived there, the first season of the TV-series "Idol" was launched. It was the exact same thing – everybody had to adjust and be compared to each other. And everybody had to be able to speak English – and this is Croatia where they've just recently been allowed to speak their own language.

It was extremely hard and time-consuming to realise **"Magical World"**.



Magical World, video stills 2005

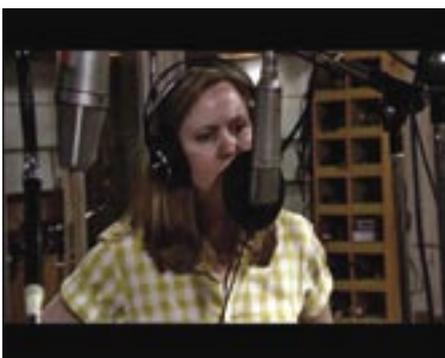
Many people thought that it would be impossible for the children to sing the song in English. I myself thought it was complicated to make them do it. But that was also one of the interesting aspects. If I was to come back in a year or two, I'm sure the situation would be completely different.

HS: At Marabou Park we will also be showing the documentation from the "You Don't Love Me Yet" project, which was a long term collaboration with Index in Stockholm (the Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation). It's an unusual project that includes the film "You Don't Love Me Yet" (2003), that shows a group of people during a recording of Roky Erickson's song "You Don't Love Me Yet" from 1984, and a tour where local artists are invited to perform a cover of the same song.

JB: It all started in autumn 2002 when I invited 20 artists to perform covers of You Don't Love Me Yet in the basement of Index in Stockholm. In theory a ridiculously simple form, that during the course of the evening while the artists one after the other repeated the song, created a very special, indescribable atmosphere. This project also began with me having a song in my head. I wasn't so fond of this song but it stuck in my mind and I kept thinking about it because it's so hard to get one's head around. It fit into a disillusioned feeling that I had that; not only do we have to achieve a successful life, we also have to achieve successful relationships. Should one postpone living together with a partner until one has accomplished one's own "thing"? – Live alone or live together? – that is the question. How can one speak about these things without making it a boring problem? How can I catch that feeling without having to say it? More than any other film "You Don't Love Me Yet" was a catalyst.



You Don't Love Me Yet, above and above right, production photos by Emanuel Almborg 2003



You Don't Love Me Yet, video still 2003

A project, in the shape of a cover, that deals with getting out of oneself. That these things can melt together. By setting up a situation where people, by their participation, can themselves experience what it means.

The event from Index was then repeated in 15 different cities including Östersund, Ystad, Chicago, Helsinki and Utrecht, where local artists continued to interpret the song which now exists in a maddening 150 versions. The project developed in such a way as to allow the venues to arrange the event themselves, which turned the event itself into a cover. The film "You Don't Love Me Yet", with a version of the song recorded by group of artists together in the Atlantis studio, was my "version" of the song where I got to arrange the song. In music, covers are made all the time, and I like the way they're made as declarations of love and how this enables the artists to offer their inspiration and their references to the audience. In the art world you have to keep showing how unique you are. If you ask artists about which artists they've been inspired by they'll often say – Oh I never look at art. It's something artists are not generous with. If an artist makes a tribute or a paraphrase, it's usually something that is being theorized or problematized.

HS: But paraphrases and hommages can be loving even if they problematize.

JB: Absolutely. But apart from that, I think it's very interesting, not only because of the declaration of love, but because the letting go of oneself musically often results in music that is more interesting than the music the artist normally creates.



John Cassavetes and Geena Rowlands in *Opening Night*, 1977



John Cassavetes, *A Woman Under the Influence*, 1974

HS: Paradoxically the uniqueness of the artist often becomes even more manifest in a cover. Speaking of references and tributes- my last question is usually what inspired the artist I'm interviewing.

JB: Before I moved to Stockholm, I visited in the city and went to see a Sophie Calle exhibition at Kulturhuset in 1991. I think it's still one of my strongest art experiences.

HS: Did any Swedish artists inspire you? I'm quite interested in finding connections between artists in Sweden.

JB: Ola Billgren was one of my early favourites. Apart from that I really like diverse artists like Magnus Bærtås, Karl Holmqvist, Ola Pehrson and Aleksandra Mir. John Cassavetes, the director, is a huge source of inspiration for me. All his films are about humanity and how we live, how complex it is - that people often live in a way that they might not want to. Maybe one doesn't see the inspiration from Cassavetes explicitly in what I do, but that's what I keep coming back to - how does one want to live?

HS: There is a lot of people stuck in things that they try to get out of in Cassavetes films. People in your films are stuck in looped events.

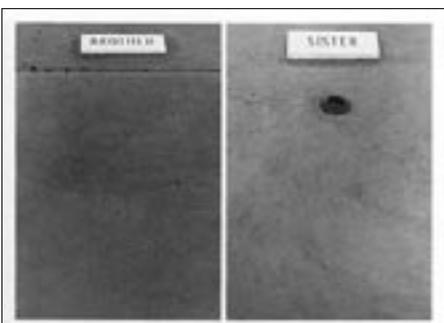
JB: Yes, I can't get away from these loops. It all began with "**Project For a Revolution**" where the loop became an important part of the content with the, in time and space, revolving idea of revolution. The main character in the film leaves and comes back while the others remain. At the same time the loops convey a pattern, an ongoing activity; like in "*Magical World*", where there is an ongoing process of learning and adaptation. I'm obsessed by circularity and retrospection in general.

Take the exhibition title for example - "**More Films About Songs, Cities and Circles**" - an attempt to sum up what I'm interested in and at the same time squeeze in a tribute to the fantastic title of the Talking Heads album from 1978 "*More Songs About Buildings and Food*". "*Stay Hungry*" - is the encouraging title of one of the songs. Isn't that an amazing title!? ■■

Helena Selder, curator Marabou Park, interviewed Johanna Billing on December 12th, 2005.



Ola Billgren, *Målning (Painting)*, 1967



Sophie Calle, *The Graves*, 1990

Sentimental Season – Johanna Billing's Magical World

Text to Radical supplement/Istanbul biennial September 2005

By Mika Hannula

At the far left corner on the ground floor at the old tobacco factory site of this years biennial we find something strange. Something that somehow does not fit in. We are confronted with a solemn and beautiful video loop focussing on a group of children practicing and playing a very particular song. What we see is something most of us deliberately wish to avoid and not to pay attention to. It is a sentimental season during which basically everyone is all of a sudden looking for a handkerchief. We have a surprised audience with slightly wet eyes and certainly a warm heart.

But hold on? What is going on? Did I say a children's music group? A set up of oh so lovely kids rehearsing an uplifting song in a cultural centre that could be located anywhere and everywhere. We see their puzzled but incredibly serious faces, we sense their excitement, the awkwardness of trying to perform in a language which is not theirs. We follow the movement of the camera, we adjust to the style of editing that borrows so very nonchalantly from classical pop/rock videos. The linear narrative is broken, but the wholeness of the event is framed and secured by the factual duration of the song. There is a beginning and an end – and the never ceasing repetition of the loop. And yes, in-between you notice the process slowly building up, brought together with an almost caressing kind of editing that smoothly flows from one face to another, one significant detail to the next.

Is this not a little too much? Too close to something that for a good

reason is labelled as social pornography? Too much like a product made for all grand-dads and grand-mamas in the imaginary public sphere?

With her film *Magical World* Johanna Billing has managed to create something of a fail-free heart-breaker, a real deal tear jerker. But contrary to our deep-seated cynical inclinations, there is absolutely nothing wrong with her style, her attitude and the result a film. On the contrary, it gives us a wonderful example of how contemporary art can steal back themes and moments that we have thought to be lost forever.

The crucial difference between Billing's work and the flood of sentimental images connected to children we have no choice but to witness day in day out is the following point: whereas the mainstream images of children are mostly instrumentalized for commercial use, Billing's piece is not a product. She is not desperately trying to sell us anything. She does not promote anything. She does not articulate a social issue or a political agenda. Her film is a work of art.

As an art work, *Magical World* is not holy, it is not above us. It is not detached from our daily realities. It is here and now. It is here and now in a way that is simply amazing. It does not shout, it does not beg. It is a film that achieves a rare atmosphere of its own kind and make. It is unique in its means of having the courage to get closer and closer to the sentimental season it wants to address and cherish.

I believe *Magical World* is a very brave work. It is an example of civil courage that goes against the tide of our times. It does not oppose commercialization of our life-worlds. However, neither does it passively just stand-by to be bought, sold and recycled. Instead, Billing offers us an alternative. She shows us how it is indeed not only possible but even preferable to deal actively with these major concepts and feelings that seem to be so cute and phoney but nevertheless important. We need them back. We need these sensations and words for our use right here, right now. We need to have an alternative ways of defining what is hope, seen both individually and collectively. We have to be able to provide alternative versions of love and hate, misery and pleasure. Versions which are not flat one-sided slogans, but entities that are characterized with inner tensions and loving conflicts.

The extra special special effect of Billing's film is obviously the song she chose to cover. With her choice, Billing is following, funny enough, the steps of that rather famous director called Tarantino. Both of them re-activate songs from the past that deserve to be again heard and recognized. With Billing's work, the original song was written by black American singer Sidney Barnes the year 1968. A song that definitely deserves to be born again. A song because of which I cannot but ask for help. It is a wish. Someone somewhere out there. Please please Mr or Mrs Postman. Does anyone have a copy to spare or borrow of the original version of the *Magical World*? ■■



Above: **Magic & Loss**, production photo 2005

Johanna Billing wants to thank:

Manne Lindwall, Henry Moore Selder, Karl-Jonas Winqvist, Lisa Panting & Malin Ståhl, Pia Sandström, Iselin Bråten Brastad, Index, Mats Stjernstedt, Helena Holmberg, Roky Erickson, Sidney Barnes, Petra Jezutkovic, Sonja Boric, Tadej Horwatic-Cajko, Mara Matic-Soldan, Ena & Sara Anicic, Lenka, Martin & Josip Mestric, Klara & Lucija Petrac, Ivana Leksic, Nikolina Penic, Zvonimir Retkovic, Mane Galoviæ & Tomislav Djurinec, Emanuel Almborg, Johanna Löwenhamn, Moderna Museet, Iaspis, Åbäke, and all the participators and organizers of the You Don't Love Me Yet Tour.

Big thank you to Mika Hannula.

Editors:

Johanna Billing
Johan Börjesson
Helena Selder

Design:

Fredrik Holmqvist

Exhibition technicians:

Jakob Krajcik
Pontus Strähle



marabouparken

Marabou Park is an institution for contemporary art in Sundbyberg, Sweden. Our temporary address for exhibitions is Vasagatan 4A in the heart of Sundbyberg.

Open Wed-Sun 12-17.
Vasagatan 4A, Sundbyberg
Web www.marabouparken.se
E-mail info@marabouparken.se
Phone +46 (0)8-29 45 90



Marabou Parken is supported by Veidekke and Sundbyberg Stad

MARABOU® is a trademark, owned and licensed by Kraft Foods.