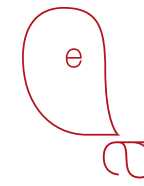


This is How We Walk On The Moon



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Jacob Fabricius: How do you think you depict social spaces in your work?

Johanna Billing: I usually avoid talking about my works from a social perspective, or about whether the emphasis is on doing things with other people or on social relationships. Personally I don't believe my films really address these issues. Instead, they are often about frustrated situations where there is no communication between people and it's clear that something isn't working.

JF: People appear to be alone — even though they're doing an activity together — but really it seems as if things are working ... in that the contents of the house do get dismantled and the boat does sail out of the harbour. Those aren't major crises. What doesn't work — the "bomb" if you like — is below the surface ...

JB: Yes, that's true. But my focus is on that aspect rather than on the specific individuals and how they relate to what's going on around them. What's also interesting is that we like to presume that doing things together in a group is associated with some positive result. But of course it isn't possible to avoid talking about the "social aspect" when you choose to work with a large group of people, as I often do. These groups in themselves can be experienced as a strong image and therefore often end up in the foreground. But the fact that they can be perceived in this way may also say something about the times we're living in today — that the image of people gathering together for some purpose is no longer a frequent event.

JF: You often use a sense of community or feelings of solidarity as a starting point — preferably the individual in relation to the group. I understand that this is not specifically Swedish, but when we talk about groups, the collective and social welfare, these are an issue that has

been discussed a lot in Swedish and Nordic contexts and in the context of the welfare state. What is your starting point?

JB: I very rarely work with pre-existing community groups. Instead, the core of my works and their content consists of a specific, staged situation that temporarily brings together people who would not normally be grouped with each other. This has been a key aspect of how the participants are linked to the various themes of my works. So my works do not present portraits of various groups in society — even though, once again, it might appear that way on the surface, for instance because the participants may be the same age or come from the same town. This may seem a bit misleading — in my experience people easily perceive other people as uniform when they are put in a group context — but it is really the differences between the participants and also their *reluctance* — their hesitation about being included in a context — that interest me. And also how this hesitation is ultimately more and more a matter of highly private decisions by the individual and not any kind of collective, homogeneous standpoint.

At the same time, I have difficulty relating to the idea that my films portray Sweden as it is "here and now". They are more a kind of inner portrait, or — as you were talking about just now — they're about something that is happening underneath the surface. My starting point for creating a work has always been fairly intuitive and personal, rather than having any immediate aim of commenting on society. Or perhaps to get to that aim I may choose to take another route, sometimes a fairly introspective one.

JF: Do you think that social awareness and feelings of solidarity have changed in Sweden?

JB: If I think about some of my

previous works that were created in Sweden, with participants who come from more or less the same generation as I do, then it is possible to experience a kind of discord between the individual and the world or society around him/her. And to see how we lose some kind of knowledge along the way and are not always in sync with how we really want to live. The films all revolve around a feeling of finding yourself slightly in between different perceptions of the world, of being in a kind of transitional period, of having grown up in a society that used to be characterised by more collective activities and contexts — not least because until that point you'd spent half your life in a world that was dominated here by school, leisure activities, the municipal art and music school and so on — but that you then suddenly find yourself in a world governed by new norms and expectations of the individual — in a place in which individuals are expected to focus their efforts into their own career that will bring them self-fulfilment.

So yes, in my experience these things you mention have changed a lot. On the other hand, I haven't been as interested in evaluating whether this change is good or bad, as I have been in depicting the actual feeling of being in the midst of something that is (for instance) in the process of dissolving. The reason is that, in my experience, it can be very hard at any given moment to grasp or to become aware of a specific kind of change that is in the process of happening here and now. This is especially true for processes that are sometimes gradual and extremely slow — for instance, the way that the public sector is being sold off over a long period of time in Sweden — and in which we cannot clearly perceive the actual change before a long time has passed and after things have changed in a fairly drastic way. But it has also been interesting to be able to relate to other places in the world, such as some countries in eastern Europe, where major

developments and dramatic upheavals can occur overnight and with incredible speed. How aware of these changes are we as individuals? How do they affect us at the everyday level? And can we as individuals have a voice in the midst of such a process?

JF: How are your works — your films and exhibitions — received in eastern Europe?

JB: The reactions can be fairly emotional. With regard to social changes and how they "feel" at the individual level, I've become aware that there has been a sense of melancholy in my films, which people in some places like eastern Europe have been able to identify with. And when you talk about emotions and melancholy you get dangerously close to nostalgia — which is an emotionally charged term in so many countries, even here! And of course there's an element of this in some projects I've done. But this is exactly what has interested me. In countries like Serbia and Croatia, or in Romania, where I've done some projects, it can be incredibly complicated for people to be able to relate to the past.

It's extremely easy to end up in a problematic situation in terms of taking different standpoints — whether they have to do with nationalism or socialism — and this doesn't make it easier to deal with traumatic events and losses. Of course, coming in from outside and addressing issues is also a sensitive matter, and many times I've been fairly uncertain whether I'd be able to comment on any of this at all. But it's turned out that people need to talk about some of these things — not least, about ones that may appear to be more trivial compared to the major, more traumatic events. One example is the project *Another Album*, which discusses the loss of a music scene in the former Yugoslavia and its impact on people's everyday lives, and emotional lives. So when the participants are there in the staged, lighted, and party-like recording situation and are

sitting in a private garden for a whole night and singing their way through a whole decade of rock songs from their older siblings' generation, superficially it might appear to be a nostalgic trip down memory lane, but to them it has far more to do with resistance — and with the possibility of keeping something alive.

In such situations, when I'm an outsider in another context, in some way it's even more important for me to emphasise that my films — even if they're based on the participants' own real experiences — are not pure documentaries. Instead, they more often depict something strained or almost unreal — a staged situation that would not ordinarily exist.

JF: Yes, it's partly documentary and partly fiction. How much do you direct your actors?

JB: I try to create situations that — even if they can be more or less real — in some way still have a fairly clear function. Situations that demand a lot of concentration from the participants so that they can do what they are there to do. In some way what I'm after is precisely what emerges as a result of this concentration. Often I don't need to give any direct instructions.

JF: It's often hard to see what is staged and what is improvised in your works. How do you play with performance in your works?

JB: It varies somewhat from work to work. Some films record and document events more; others contain elements that are more staged. So the films operate in a borderline between documentary and fiction. But I must also say that I don't really feel at home in the current debate in art and also in literature about what is fiction versus reality. Like many others who are working in film with an emphasis on aspects like improvisation, I'm more curious about getting close to a kind of reality, or to a feeling of presence

that can arise during filming. I also work exclusively with people who aren't actors but who often have some kind of relationship to what the film is about even if that isn't part of their everyday life, and who can thereby contribute their own experiences to the process.

So there is always both freedom but also a kind of uncertainty for the participants and how they should relate to what's going on around them. In a similar way, I'm also interested in another kind of insecurity that viewers can feel later on when the film is presented and they enter into the staged scene as visitors. This is perhaps what you're talking about here, that we may feel we can't understand exactly what's happening — not only exactly who is in the film and what unites them, but also what kind of film we're actually watching.

It's because the film can oscillate between appearing to document a performance, or being a kind of music video, to seeming more like a short fictional film or even a pure documentary, that it can seem rather like a camera lens that keeps slipping and can't be focused properly. And so when we as viewers shift between the various possibilities and can't instantaneously figure out what kind of film it is, this in turn can mean that it's not as easy for us to get stuck in traditional ruts about how we "should" watch different kinds of films. In these small "gaps" between different traditions we can experience a frustration that means we can't relax but that enables another form of communication, one that is often more physical or bodily. Given that what I'm trying to get at in these films is often what is not being expressed, or what people are unable to talk about, in my view it can be easier to compare them to various types of choreography than to other kinds of films or film genres.

JF: At times I feel there is a heavy, almost Bergmanesque silence in

your films that's impossible not to notice — do you understand what I mean?

JB: Yes, it's probably because of the concentration again — in such situations there arises a very palpable sense of presence. It could also be because the films have a rhythm that brings out the meditative aspect of the situation, or the film loop that reinforces the sense that time is almost standing still. In my opinion, when we stop and pay more attention than might be expected to something that is in front of our eyes in our everyday lives, this can create this sense of stillness — suddenly you're able to hear what you're thinking.

JF: Could you describe how your interest in music started and how it developed in the recordings you published under your *Make it happen* label, in the events you organised, and in your own works?

JB: I've worked with music as long as I can remember — doing everything from organising concerts at the Kulturhuset cultural centre in Jönköping where I grew up, to writing about music, to producing. Above all, I've listened a lot to music and for long periods I've been a real music nerd. Around the middle and end of the 1990s, I was involved in organising music clubs in Stockholm while also working with the artist-run gallery Ynglingagatan 1. There, in addition to the exhibition programme, we also organised performances and other events every week. It became a natural meeting place for visual artists who were also working with music. In my experience, during this time the general situation changed to permit a greater interest in music on the part of both visual artists and the art institutions — something that was obviously tremendously exciting. But I also experienced how difficult and limited the situation could still be — that when music was invited into a fine art context

it could still end up in a strange hierarchy and be treated in a way that was not always optimal, or it was not always given the best conditions. For example, music then — and maybe still today — is often assigned a subordinate role as something festive to be performed during some kind of official opening event.

As a result, to try to find a platform where both musicians and artists could present performance works and music based on the conditions that they needed, in 1997 I founded the record label called *Make it happen* with my brother, who was a journalist. Neither of us had any experience with that side of the music industry, but our ambition was to try to explore the possibilities and not just focus on the rules for production and distribution which governed the music industry at that time. In many ways it was a do-it-yourself project, which is why we chose the name. We hoped that the record label — not only via the projects we did, but also in and of itself and due to its simple format — could function as a kind of catalyst or opportunity for artists or other people who wanted to launch similar productions themselves. During the first years from 1998 onward, our label, which distributed music, existed primarily via large, recurring events featuring concerts and performance works. Our company also organised a number of bus tours in Sweden and some other countries, through which performers and artists linked to our label presented a kind of mini-festivals.

During the years when we were working most intensively with *Make it happen*, I was therefore more interested in working with music within the music world, since I felt it was important that music was given first priority and did not turn into a spectacle within the art world — or that the record label was treated as if it were an art project. Later, though, I also felt a need to

work with some of these very mechanisms within the music and art worlds respectively. So when in 2002 I set up the touring cover (version) project *You Don't Love Me Yet*, which is now continually ongoing, and which at one level is about relationships on both the emotional (love) and professional planes (after a song written by the American musician Roky Erickson), it felt natural to start from my experiences in both these fields and to work with issues like the scepticism and hierarchies associated with them.

Since then I've continued to work a lot with music in my films, while at the same time my record label is still active with another kind of musical productions. As well, via my films I have increasingly referred back to the time when I was working as a music journalist, and I have become interested in the significance of music in a more historical perspective, and to people at a personal level. In films like *Magical World* and *Another Album* or *This Is How We Walk on the Moon* music plays a role on several different levels. It's been exciting for me to work on developing this, both in relation to film and to how you normally work with a soundtrack that accompanies images.

JF: Despite their differences, your films *Magical World* and *Another Album* share the joy of the amateur and a delight in music. The process of how to document the genesis of a song would appear to be a central theme. Is there a kind of "learning by doing" in your films?

JB: Yes, I'm clearly dealing with various kinds of learning processes. But, as I just mentioned, I focus primarily on people doing things that they don't normally do — in contrast with the image of an amateur who works to try to become better at something — and that's why people aren't professionally good at what they're doing. It's about

putting yourself in situations where you have to do something that you don't have 100 percent knowledge about. The older we get, the more inclined we are to avoid getting into situations that are ruled by uncertainty and in which we have to learn something from scratch. I feel that I'm returning to this theme more and more, presumably because I myself also feel that this dislike of new situations is becoming stronger every year.

JF: I've always been fascinated by Jean-Luc Godard's 1968 film *One Plus One* about how the Rolling Stones made *Sympathy for the Devil*, because the documentary aspect is combined with Godard's New York fiction about Marxism and revolution. Is it the "do it yourself" singer that interests you or do you see the possibilities of the *One Plus One* genre today?

JB: I discovered *One Plus One* at a fairly late stage. It's a totally fantastic film and I'm very inspired by Godard in general. I haven't actively thought about the similarities in our working method and I'm not holding up such obviously political placards, even though I do have a similar liking for inserting scenes around the main theme. But I can draw great inspiration from the act of choosing to focus on the song's actual genesis — the song's production in the studio — and also that the political contents of the lyrics tell a story about the era when the song was created. It's about being able to rely on the fact that documenting such a process can encompass enough other content. This is what I do fairly often — I trust that a specific situation can by itself support a bigger story.

JF: A number of your works deal with sound. Often they only contain real-life sounds that tell us what's happening. Sometimes we hear the sound played by the musicians in your works, other times there is a minimal, almost

John Cage-like sound image. How do you relate to sound in your individual works?

JB: Sound has always been incredibly important to me. It's one of the reasons why I chose to work with video in particular. Video consists of 50 percent sound and 50 percent image, even though video is not always treated that way within the art world, where the image is still far more dominant. While I was attending school I worked a lot with staging, which resulted in various photographic works. But more and more I discovered that it was the actual atmosphere in the specific situation — the setting — that I wanted to get at, and in some way photography was never enough. Instead — also due to my background in experimental music and focused listening — I experienced that in many cases sound is superior to other media when it comes to describing atmospheres or emotional situations. At an exhibition, if we can also activate a listening process in the viewer of a work, this can make it easier to absorb the contents of the work in a more intimate or private way. So switching to work with video, where I could give sound a prominent role, proved to be extremely effective for the moods and situations I wanted to convey.

With some exceptions, I've worked exclusively with the existing sound in a recording situation and only very rarely with added sounds. It has been important to allow the sound of the moment — which belongs to the images and what is happening — to play a major role and emphasise the sense of presence in the situation. But also to convey the natural, and sometimes almost surrealistic, aspects of the sound that surrounds us everyday. My sound world is thus fairly pared down and minimalist. But together with the rhythm of the editing — rhythm is incredibly important to me because it has

such a physical quality — these sounds can still result in a kind of musical experience in the end result. So these quiet films are to me at least as musical as the ones that have more conventional music.

JF: *This Is How We Walk on the Moon* is a voyage, an ordinary peaceful trip out to sea. Yet the minimalist representation is very physical — or as you say corporal — as is Arthur Russell's song *This Is How We Walk on the Moon*. The lyrics are simple: "...Every step is moving me up. One tiny, tiny, tiny move, It's all I need ..." but they're still very physical and they're about movement as the process of learning how to walk. Why did you choose *This Is How We Walk on the Moon* to be the title of your work?

JB: There are only a few artists like Arthur Russell who can create such physical music in such a minimalist way. This song has stayed with me for a number of years and I've always been very fascinated by the sentence: *This Is How We Walk on the Moon*. That such a small word, "this", can contain so much — it seems to me as if he's trying to describe "this" in what we in particular do today, in this particular "now." History has described walking on the moon as man's — or rather mankind's — great step or leap. Today, forty years later, it's interesting to think about what now constitutes a great step, or a step into new or unknown territory. And to consider the relationship between what is regarded as being a great step for people at the individual level and for the society we live in.

JF: Could you describe the production of *This Is How We Walk on the Moon*?

JB: In 2006 I spent quite some time in Edinburgh, where I was invited to do a project. A lot of what I knew about modern-day Edinburgh came from music I'd previously listened to — there's

a strong music scene there right now with performers like King Creosote, James Yorkston, Unpoec, Pictish Trail and others. All of them share a passion for the sea. In their lyrics they write about life on the ocean, sailors and captains, shipwrecks and lighthouses — and about navigation and how they steer in various directions out to sea. So when I first visited Edinburgh, the first thought I had was to come into direct contact with this water. That turned out to be trickier than I'd thought. It was only after I'd climbed a high hill that I could see that the city — presumably built in a very realistic way to give it protection from the cold winds from the North Sea — in fact turned away from the sea. After a while I increasingly discovered that very few people in this area — including most of these fanatical lyricists — actually had any links at all to the sea — for instance, they'd never even set foot in a boat. So on one level there was this great distance between people and their relationship to the water in purely practical terms — and on the other hand this relationship existed as a distant, romantic idea, but despite this was constantly present in the culture and in people's lives and everyday existence.

It was when I was walking along thinking about this, by the coast — where people in Edinburgh (as in so many other cities at that time) had suddenly decided to build luxury homes at the water's edge after thousands of years of having a completely different urban planning system — that this song about the moon turned up again. It was probably because the movements of the tide at this particular location — which are so strong and are a constant reminder of the strong gravitational forces — have such a strong effect on a person. And in some way something was triggered there — the idea of working with a group of musicians who were also inexperienced

sailors during their first sailing trip, and to improvise music based on Arthur Russell's song as a starting point. It felt natural to create the music using only string instruments. Russell himself was a minimalist cellist, and I was looking for something that at a very physical, concrete level could tie into the natural soundscape around a boat out on the water — the sound made by the wind in the boat's sheets and rigging. It's also when you actually handle the ropes on board a sailboat that — for a brief second now and again when the wind catches and you're steering — it feels as if you have control over a small part of life itself. But in the next second things can turn into chaos. So it is a unique situation to document someone who is trying to get a grip on these various elements for the first time.

JF: What is the difference between side A and side B on this *This Is How We Walk on the Moon* record? Why was it important for you to present the sound and music this way?

JB: The music was improvised and recorded live in a studio based on a score that I had created, which most closely resembled a kind of weather chart, but which in accordance with the film's timeline also followed how things developed for the participants on board the boat. It was a new experience for me to be able to work on producing music in such an organic way as the way in which this was filmed. In the finished soundtrack, the music has been cut and mixed with the existing sound. Towards the end of the film, which lasts for half an hour, the music increasingly takes on the form of a conventional cover (version) of the title song by Russell, and there is also singing by some of the participants in the film.

The A side contains this soundtrack all by itself, while the B side contains all the studio

takes of some of the music passages in their entirety plus a somewhat shortened version of the interpretation of *This Is How We Walk on the Moon* — you could call it a radio edit!

It's really quite amusing, because at first, presenting the sound and music in this way was anything but important — on the contrary. For a long time I was completely unwilling to extract the soundtracks from some of the films I'd made and put them on records. I felt that the music was only part of the entirety comprised of the project and the film, and that making a record would involve losing the entire concept and turning it into a more uninteresting product. But as these music films, such as *You Don't Love Me Yet* or *Magical World*, had been around for a couple of years, it became clear that it made no difference whether or not I tried to stick with that viewpoint — the music found its own routes to take anyway. And one day a few years ago, when I suddenly received an email from a guy, Volker Zander at a small German record company called apparent extent, asking if he could release my soundtracks on vinyl, I felt the whole situation became quite comical. I was the one who had the record label, but I'd never been asked such a thing! Why not?

This will now be the third record of my film music, and as long as the films are still allowed to have their own life, and the music is primarily created with that approach — for the sake of the project — then it doesn't matter much that the music is also able to live its own life on the side. After all, I'm still a music nerd.

JF: For the exhibition at Malmö Konsthall we've discussed whether you want to exhibit photographs or other documentation in addition to the films. You mentioned that you've never before exhibited photos or

stills from your films. Can you tell us what has stopped you from doing it before?

JB: When you've found a way of working that you love and you've then been doing it for a while, some of your methods risk becoming almost rules for you — and then it's easy to become dogmatic. So, in the same way that it was suddenly fun to go against my own preconceived ideas and actually give the music a chance with these releases, recently I've started to bend another rigid rule I made for myself — not to exhibit photos. At first it was probably because I was striving to create a work that would say everything itself, but it was definitely also a reaction against a format that video artists tend to use, when they choose to present photos along with their films as products for sale.

But the fact is that I photograph masses of things all the time, and the photos are a hugely important element in the entire work process, which for me is also extremely long and lasts for one or two years. The more time that passes after every project, the more you also realise that the projects contain far, far more than what actually makes it into the films. So, in the same way that it can be interesting to extract the music, it can also be exciting to extract aspects of the processes in the form of photos. But I'm still struggling with this thought, so at this precise moment I'm not entirely sure that there will be any photos included this time either...

The above email interview with Johanna Billing is made during the months of May and June 2008 in connection with the exhibition *This Is How We Walk on the Moon* by Johanna Billing at Malmö Konsthall, Sweden