



KARIN BECKER

Art through City Space  
Report on a Project in Artistic Research

**KONST GENOM STADEN  
ART THROUGH CITY SPACE**

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## Art through City Space Report on a Project in Artistic Research

The overall aim of this project was to develop arts-based research involving, in various ways, urban space and its inhabitants. The project title — ‘art *through* city space’ — suggests movement and flow, as well as a perspective. Thus, the space of the city provided a conceptual framework for developing works that engaged with far larger issues than those conventionally associated with art *in* public space.

### Art and public space

As initially formulated, ‘Art through City Space’ was to address issues concerning the place of art in contemporary urban space. The idea was that the work developed in the project would, in one way or another, be ‘public art’ even as it was expected to challenge and contest traditional views of the place of art in public space. Through the process and the artworks that were realised over the three-year period, the artistic research process led the project group into a range of other questions and practices central to contemporary urban life.



The traditional concept of public art as heroic and commemorative monuments built to invoke history and withstand the ravages of time and vandalism no longer seems appropriate for the questions posed today. What should the role of public art be in times of permanent change? The ‘norm of publicness’ said by Michael Miles to govern the display of art in public space is no longer relevant.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the work of many contemporary artists confronts the old norms of public art.<sup>2</sup> In work that is ephemeral, performance- or web-based and interactive, for example, we find artists who maintain the flux between permanence and change, between past and present, that is central to contemporary city life. Is there a place for works, often made in collaboration with ‘non-artists’, that challenge the concept of public consensus, with its received concepts of history and value?<sup>3</sup> An issue related to this question is that of the right of self-expression in the public sphere of urban space, which is raised by the work of graffiti and street artists as well as feminist theorists, and challenges many of the established

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Miles, *Art Space and the City*. London: Routledge, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Stewart, *The Open Studio*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Many of these questions were raised in a series of discussions on ‘The Possibilities of Public Space’, organised by the Swedish National Public Art Council (*Konstrådet*) and Swedish Travelling Exhibitions (*Riksställningar*) in 2004–05, which provided inspiration for this project. See ORM 2005 and the Swedish National Public Art Council, 2002, 2003).



hierarchies of the fine arts.<sup>4</sup> A primary question is: in this age of diversity, who are the ‘general public’? How does art through city space position its audience, and to whom does it speak?

Another issue is whether art can serve as a counterweight to the increasingly privatised and commercialised arenas of public life.<sup>5</sup> The mediatisation of public space, particularly through advertising, continues apace. This is also relevant to the problematic relationship between centre and periphery: here again, media and the arts play a key role in assigning significance to these different spatial regions. At the same time, new media forms and their uses broaden the concept of the ‘public sphere’. The physical space of the agora has been superseded by debate and exchange of ideas in virtual space.

Finally, there is the question of whether art in, as and/or through public space can articulate both individual and collective aspects of experience in an era of constant change. This calls for artistic research that engages reflective thought on social processes, and that uses the past and its various histories as tools for considering the

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<sup>4</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994; Karin Becker, ‘Taking Place and making Space’ (*Att ta plats och skapa rum*), *Catalogue 34*. Stockholm: Swedish National Public Art Council, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Karin Becker, ‘Just looking: Solna Centrum as a visual arena’ (‘Bara titta – Solna Centrum som visuell arena’), in Becker et al. (eds.) *Passages. Media and Culture in a Shopping Centre* (*Passager. Medier och kultur i ett köpcentrum*). Nora: Nya Doxa, 2001.



present. As Esther Shalev-Gerz formulated the challenge in her project proposal,

such articulations of remembering and forgetting is conducted in relation to two distinct poles: on the one hand, collective or public knowledge, i.e., everything stemming from public education, communication and information, such as the media, and, on the other hand, the personal relationship that we maintain with our past experiences and especially with our own present; however, these opposite poles combine to form a perpetual movement, a state of constant imbalance.

How, then, can art in public space engage with this imbalance?

### Project participants

The project was initiated by Karin Becker, a media researcher who, at the time, was Guest Professor at the Department of Culture Studies, Linköping University. As such, she was responsible for developing forms of collaboration between academic and artistic research. She contacted three artists whose work involved issues of art in public space in distinct ways, and invited them to submit project proposals based on their previous work.

The first project, proposed by photographer Johan Berglund, built on his experience of documenting everyday life in strife-ridden regions and the questions it raised about representations of



difference. Berglund has worked extensively as a freelance photographer in areas of conflict, documenting people whose lives nevertheless follow the seemingly peaceful routines of everyday existence. Working to create a sense of identification between the people in his photographs and inhabitants of Swedish cities, Berglund arranged large-scale exhibitions of his work in public space. For several weeks, the buildings surrounding the central square in Stockholm were draped with some of his best work.

In parallel, he organised seminars and distributed brochures explaining the project and including interviews with his subjects. His plan for *Art through City Space* was to extend this previous work and also develop and launch the magazine *Unfold*. Devoted to documentary photography and critical reportage, *Unfold* was to be issued in a large format and financed by major advertisers. Berglund's aim remained to establish, through high-quality visual reportage, a basis for identification with people who lived less than eight hours away, and implicitly to criticise the reports provided by mainstream media.



8H. Photo: Johan Berglund

The second artist in *Art through City Space*, Jonas Dahlberg, had just completed *Invisible Cities*, a project that looked at those cities that remain 'invisible' to non-residents.<sup>6</sup> There are, he found, an estimated 14,000 cities worldwide with a population of 10,000 or fewer; together, they contain 10% of the world's population. Dahlberg proposed a new project in collaboration with Göran Dahlberg, a writer, cultural theorist and editor of the cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Jonas Dahlberg & Göran Dahlberg, *Invisible Cities*. Stockholm: Moderna museet (museum of modern art).



magazine *Glänta* who had also contributed to *Invisible Cities. Secret Cities*, as they called the project, referred to cities that are kept out of public view — ‘They’re not even on the map’. This is either because the inhabitants choose to keep them secret (gated communities being a primary example) or because secrecy is imposed (prison and concentration camps, and the huge slums in many large cities, are other examples). The Dahlbergs, using their two different ways of working, addressed questions concerning the histories of these cities and their infrastructures. What holds them together and ‘protects’ them from being seen by the world outside? One specific object of inquiry in the project was the border around the ‘secret’ city, how it is maintained and who is allowed to cross it.

The third proposal came from Esther Shalev-Gerz, an artist who questions the ‘memorial’ as a form of art in public space, and develops projects that transgress the border between individual and collective memory. Born in Lithuania and now living in Paris, in recent years Shalev-Gerz has completed many public art projects in Sweden. In these, people — immigrants, Sami, folk artists — record and relive their past experience, usually through video performances. These personal histories are contextualised through archival research and interviews. In the project she developed for *Art through City Space* Shalev-Gerz worked, as usual, with local



institutions and history museums. In her initial proposal, she had planned to realise a previous project proposed for the city of Gävle. When additional funding to support a work in Norrköping became available, she decided instead to create an installation that would represent the history and memories of workers in the textile mills of this old industrial city.<sup>7</sup> Norrköping has been transformed over the past generation: the mills have closed and the old factory buildings have been put to new uses, notably educational institutions and the university. This transformation has also meant a change in employment patterns, with the advent of more highly educated commuters, while unemployment among local young people has remained high. Shalev-Gerz’s project *Sound Machine* which investigated memory in its non-concrete and more body-related forms, grew out of interviews with a group of women, former mill workers, and their daughters. How had the sounds of the factory — noise that had dominated their lives but is now absent from the city — affected them?

A sixth participant in the project was Bodil Axelsson, a researcher in the Department of Culture Studies at Linköping

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<sup>7</sup> Esther Shalev-Gerz received a grant from the Swedish Research Council (VR) to serve as visiting professor at Linköping University in 2007–08. Her tasks included developing an artistic research project in collaboration with the Department of Culture Studies (Tema Q) and the interdisciplinary programme ‘Culture, Society and Media Representation’ (*Kultur Sambälle och Mediegestaltning*, KSM).



University, with a key role as project assistant. She documented the project throughout the three-year period and, based on her prior experience and research in cultural performance and the arts, contributed in important ways to the evolving conceptualisation of artistic research in the project.

### A process unfolds

*Art through City Space* was planned as a collaborative project, involving many different participants, forms and methods of working together.<sup>8</sup> It was initially designed as a collaboration between artistic and academic research, linked to a cultural research project that was to investigate the making of urban centrality, with a particular focus on the place of media and the visual arts. When no funding was obtained for this research, its collaborative aspect fell by the wayside. Interest in those research questions persisted, however, thanks to the ongoing interests of the project leader and assistant.

A second form of collaboration was among the artists participating in the project. Their individual work, at least in the project leader's expectations, was to provide a base for sharing and exchanging ideas and techniques that would contribute to the

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Lind, 'Introduction', *Taking the Matter into Common Hands* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), p. 9.



project as a whole. The artists' widely divergent approaches to their work were seen as a strength of the project. The contrasting ways in which their work engaged with the overarching themes of the project were expected to exert a cumulative effect that would, in some sense, be greater than the sum of the individual parts.

This collaboration called for a clear consensus among the participants that this form of exchange should be a priority in the project. Faced with a project budget roughly one-third of the original project design, the participants had to radically reconceptualise their visions of what their work was to entail. Collaboration, in the sense of convening to discuss and exchange ideas about work in progress, became a dispensable luxury. The geographical dispersion of the project group was an additional complication. The participants were based variously in Paris, Gothenburg, Malmö, Norrköping and also, in the third year of the project, Stockholm and Berlin. This made face-to-face meetings both difficult and expensive to coordinate.

Despite these practical and financial hindrances, collaboration took place during the several project meetings and the public seminar held at the Norrköping Art Museum in May 2008. During the early meetings and email exchanges, much of the discussion focused on financial and bureaucratic constraints faced by



participants in their efforts to carry out their work. How the project would be documented was another concern. For example, the project leader and assistant wanted to tape-record project meetings, with the idea that these discussions would provide insights into the artistic research process. The artists, on the other hand, had serious reservations about this form of documentation, on the grounds that it placed the focus on a form of discourse that misrepresented the artistic process, and would miss significant phases and activities in the evolution of their work. The disagreement was resolved by taking notes on, instead of tape-recording, the meetings. *Sound Machine* was an exception, since this project was conceptualised to include substantial documentation through field notes, interviews and video recordings of different aspects of the work process. This was made possible by its pedagogical aim, involving collaboration with a programme in creative production at Linköping University, and the extra funding it had received. Documenting *Sound Machine* became a complex collaborative effort between Shalev-Gerz and Axelsson. The latter's responsibilities as project assistant were substantially expanded to include following and assisting in the realisation of that work.

By the second year of the project, the participants were discussing how their work was developing and a new interest in



collaboration was infusing the meetings. In addition to the ongoing issue of economic constraints (the funding that made the project feasible simultaneously set limits on what could be done) the artists brought in examples that provided inspiration and material for their work. Experience from travel to other cities and encounters with ways of life there expanded the scope of the discussion — and here the far-flung nature of the group proved to be a real resource, rather than a hindrance. The techniques involved in realising the work were another important topic of discussion, covering information on the features of different cameras, computer programs and even the chemicals used in a particular work. Technology, besides involving the mechanics of production, became an interface where new opportunities, problems and creative solutions were aired.

As the scope of the discussions expanded it also became less clear what specific 'works' fell within the scope of this project. Each artist was working simultaneously on several projects, many of them linked to the broad theme *Art through City Space*. In some cases, the individual projects were also evolving away from their original descriptions and conceptions. This generated what the group came to call 'extra material', similar to the extra scenes included in the DVD of a feature film. Discussion of these 'coincidences' and 'sidetracks', which at first seemed barely relevant and yet proved



fruitful in terms of project growth, gave rise to an interest in finding a way to present these seemingly extraneous strands of their work, and ‘extra material’ was the outcome. The group decided to hold an open seminar and began to discuss a web-based publication of the project.

In May 2008, the seminar ‘Art through City Space: Sound Machine & Extra Material’ was held in collaboration with Norrköping Art Museum. About 25 art critics, administrators and educators from around Sweden joined in a round-table discussion, based on the material from the project. Göran and Jonas Dahlberg presented their preliminary work from *Secret Cities* and its background in the earlier *Invisible Cities*.



From *Invisible Cities* by Jonas Dahlberg



Norrköping's industrial landscape. Photo: Bodil Axelsson

Jonas Berglund presented a dummy of *Unfold*, including its graphic design, and showed examples of the kinds of documentary photography and reportage it was to include, with a launch planned for late autumn. Esther Shalev-Gerz led a discussion and answered questions about *Sound Machine* in its two sites: in the Museum and through the city to the bridge and the sound installation there.



## Work taking shape

*Sound Machine* included the forms of collaboration most often associated with ‘the collaborative turn’ in the arts.<sup>9</sup> In her practice, Shalev-Gerz works with public institutions, and through her research and organising efforts she mobilises a network that works together to realise each project she undertakes. *Sound Machine* was consistent with this practice. The local institutions involved in various stages of this project included Norrköping City Museum, the Art Museum and the national Museum of Work, as well as some of the students and teachers from the Norrköping Campus of Linköping University. Through this network and, in particular, a woman who worked at the City Museum and whose mother had been a millworker, Shalev-Gerz located a group of women who knew one another from their days of working in the mills and through their daughters. She interviewed these women about their work and especially their experience of the sound of the machines. Selected quotations from these interviews were reproduced on the walls of the exhibition space. The video installations showed each mother and daughter as they listened to the sound, with images of the machines behind them.

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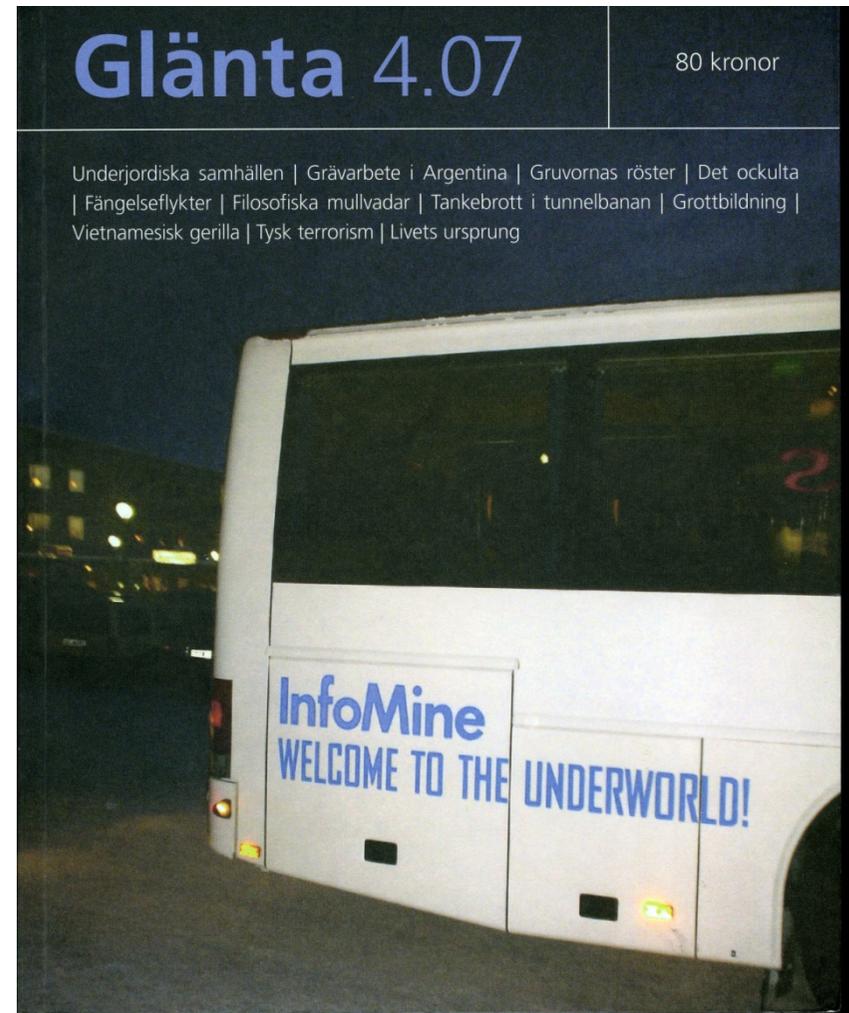
<sup>9</sup> Joanna Billing, Maria Lind & Lars Nilsson (eds.), *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On contemporary art and collaborative practices*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007.



From *Sound Machine* by Esther Shalev-Gerz



Both the machines in the video and the machine sound were reconstructions that Shalev-Gerz developed with help from digital artists and assistants on her team. The Dahlbergs' work on *Secret Cities* continued, superficially appearing to diverge into separate projects. Göran Dahlberg's travels and research led him to clarify distinctions and statements about the two types of 'secret cities': those whose secrecy is self-imposed and those that have secrecy imposed on them, i.e. when someone else wants them to remain unknown. Common to both types is that they are isolated, private and impenetrable, while differing in the degree of freedom, control and accessibility they allow. He expanded these characteristics, creating a framework of the most important ways in which secrecy is maintained. He then used these in his ongoing investigation, drawing on a range of sources and his travel experience. He described his method as essayistic, reclaiming the original meaning of 'essay' ('attempt', from the French *essai*). He worked by making claims, a little too large and too certain, many in the form of stating that "it's like this", in order to make it obvious that he was engaged in a kind of testing. The first section of his study, on underground cities, was published with the title 'People live there'.<sup>10</sup> A second section, focusing on slums as secret cities, appeared in *Orde&Bild*.<sup>11</sup>



*Glänta 4/2007.*

<sup>10</sup> Göran Dahlberg, 'People live there' (*Folk Bor Där*), *Glänta 4/2007*.

<sup>11</sup> Göran Dahlberg, 'Towns and cities kept secret' (*Hemlighållna städer*). *Orde&Bild 4/2008*.



Jonas Dahlberg, in the meantime, had continued to work on several interrelated projects about the private spaces within cities, which he built as meticulously detailed architectural models, and penetrating them with a video camera that moves through the space. Despite their diverging methods, the Dahlbergs' work continued to be closely linked conceptually through their common concern with how secrecy is maintained, and the meanings of the gaze (or looking) in this process. Jonas Dahlberg's final work during the project period, *View Through a Park*, offers the clearest expression of this link.<sup>12</sup> While his earlier work had often been about abstract places that become materialised through videos of detailed architectural models he has constructed, this work is based on the histories and practices of a real place, Gramercy Park, New York City's oldest private park. Having built an exact replica of Gramercy Park, Dahlberg then filmed it as an empty place at night, with the camera slowly moving through the park and its surrounding buildings. *View Through a Park* presents a closed, private and depopulated urban environment, using the roving voyeuristic eye of what could be a surveillance camera — in a park we are forbidden to enter.

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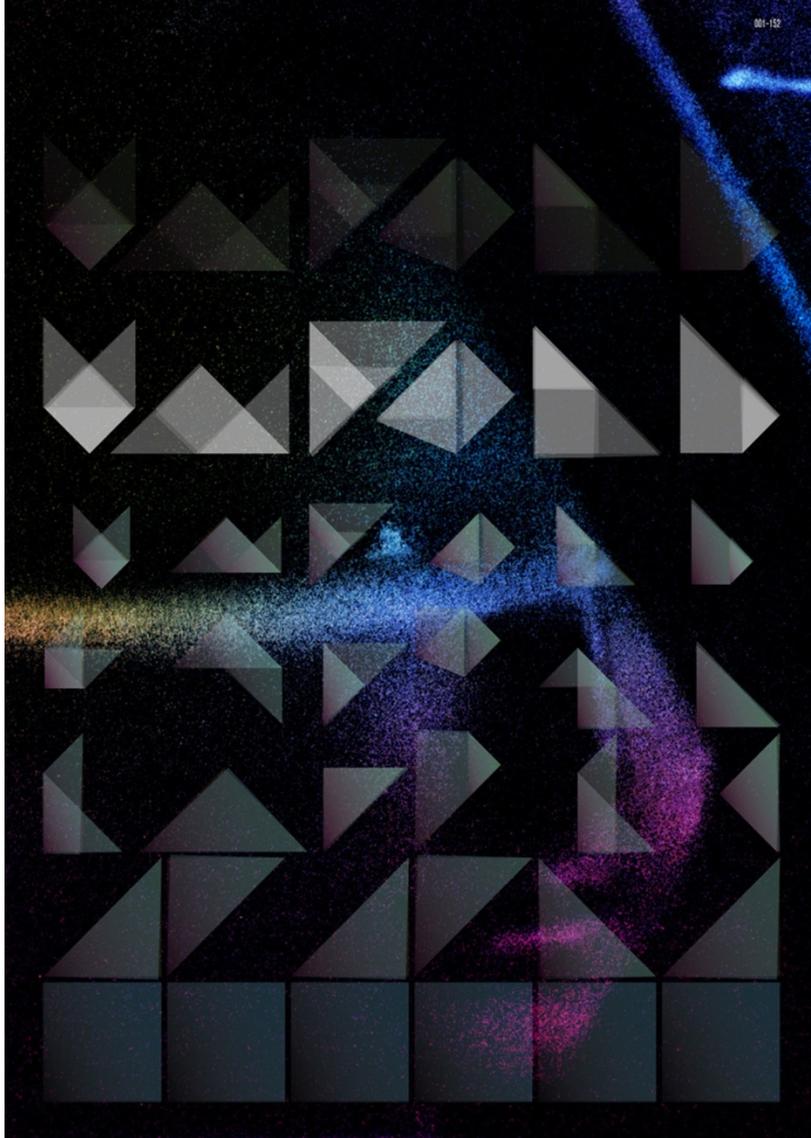
<sup>12</sup> *View Through a Park* was first shown at Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm, from 14 May to 28 June 2009.



From *View Through a Park* by Jonas Dahlberg

Johan Berglund's work on *Unfold* also continued, as he lined up contributors to the first two issues and contacted potential advertisers. His plans for the magazine came to an abrupt halt in October 2008 with the immediate, sharp economic downturn. *Unfold* remains a fully conceptualised work, on the shelf until the time is right to relaunch it.





Cover of *Unfold*

Berglund used this slack period in the project to return to his photography, and developed several new themes that seem, at first glance, far removed from the focus of his previous documentary reportage on the everyday lives of people living in areas of strife. Instead, he has been using his access to the Bordeaux wineries (from his earlier freelance work) in a documentary project on this closed and exclusive world of wine production. Although its setting appears rural, an urbanised elite is what we see in these (as yet) unpublished photographs. This emerging reportage on everyday life in a kind of ‘gated community’ has clear links with the Dahlbergs’ work, and would probably have looked quite different had Berglund been pursuing it outside the framework of *Art through City Space*.

### Artistic research through city space

So how did these very different forms of artistic research engage with and alter ideas about urban space and its inhabitants? In the course of the project, three distinct ways of engaging with public space emerged: first, a physical, geographical space connected to other places across the globe; second, an historical and local place laden with individual and collective memories; and third, an idea or concept with histories of ideology, power and privilege. Each work raised questions related to one or more of these aspects. In addition,



all the work interrogated the boundaries that define, obscure and reveal what we know as ‘public’.

Johan Berglund’s *8H* was, at the outset, the project that involved the most direct engagement with public space itself and its passers-by, for whom Sergels torg in central Stockholm was, in de Certeau’s term, a ‘practised place’.<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that Berglund’s photographs, hanging on buildings surrounding this central square, had an impact on that physical public space and changed what it looked like. Whether the installation helped passers-by identify with or feel linked to the people in the photographs is harder to determine. Some viewers thought *8H* was an advertising campaign, although for what product they couldn’t say. This may say more about the difficulty of mobilising a display on this scale with non-commercial sources. Berglund is, of course, aware of the criticism that his photographs can be classified as being of the kinds that exoticise and aestheticise ‘the other’, enabling ‘us’ (in this case northern Europeans, presumably comfortable and secure) to maintain a distance from people living in the midst of conflict. In spite of their *visual* presence, their experience remains remote.

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<sup>13</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.



Yet if one believes, as Berglund most certainly does, in the power of photography and in particular, that the authenticity of good visual reportage can override the competing claims and interests one encounters in public space, then this work engaged not only with this space, but also with the people who passed through it. *Unfold* was planned as an extension of that space, again confronting the difficult boundary between documentary editorial content and commerce. Using multiple platforms — physical public space, the upscale magazine and the web — Berglund expands the place of photography while, at the same time, his work reveals and critiques the ways in which commercial media constrict our view of the world.

Esther Shalev-Gerz’ *Sound Machine* transformed the artist’s engagement with the city’s industrial landscape and its physicality into a work that connected the city’s past and present, as well as different spaces within the city — the art museum and the bridge. Her research and the participants she engages in the works provided a rich fund, which she then reworked to create an experience that stood for the participants’ memories. Their participation was a decisive element in the realisation of this work. The noise of the factory had disappeared, but remained as a memory in the bodies of the women who had worked there, and one they had passed on to



their daughters. By re-creating the physical experience of the sound and including their responses to it, Shalev-Gerz was able to visualise the absence of this sound, its association with the past, in the space of the city and the individual and collective memories of its inhabitants.

Neither of the Dahlbergs' work is *in* public space in this sense. But it very much engages *with* public space, contesting the border between what is public, shared and accessible, and what is private, restricted and hidden, or at least attempts to be. Jonas Dahlberg's *View Through a Park* cannot be separated from the framework of questions and critiques about the definitions of 'public', 'participation' and 'engagement' in public arenas, and who decides. The concepts of 'private' and the 'park' appear contradictory. Together, they create an anomaly that he then interrogates with the camera. We become intruders, crossing the border between public and private that he has made visible.

## Conclusions

Over time, the *Art through City Space* project became a fruitful framework that the participants were able to use to explore common, diverse and partially overlapping issues regarding contemporary urban life. These included what is private or secret



versus what is public or shared, and questions of individual histories and memories versus those that are collective and shared. Their work addressed what lies at the centre of this experience and what remains at the periphery, and how the borders between them can be made visible and penetrated through artistic research. The project itself provided a loose structure for these explorations, and each of the participants maintained important and necessary links to other projects and venues for their work.

*Art through City Space* was never self-supporting. It was made possible, in part, by the forms of prior collaboration the participants brought to the project. These external links were at times necessary to sustain the artists' participation in the project. At the same time they made it possible to introduce the themes, questions and methods of the project in other venues. Thus, when launching *Unfold* proved impossible, Johan Berglund was able to use his previous network of clients and contacts to re-enter the exclusive society of French wine production, exploring it now as a kind of secret city or gated community. When Jonas and Göran Dahlberg decided it was not feasible to work as closely together as they had originally planned, they had the earlier venues that welcomed their individual work. For Jonas, Gallery Nordenhake was the obvious place for *View Through a Park*, and *Glänta* will publish Göran's



forthcoming book on secret cities. Esther Shalev-Gerz is including *Sound Machine* in her retrospective exhibition that opens at Jeu de Paume in Paris in February 2010. Through these and other extensions of the participants' work, the insights and processes developed in *Art through City Space* continue to make a mark on the ways in which we can reflect on and practise art in public space.

