



Family Life  
The Artist's Hidden Secrets  
Lars Embäck

SPLEEN  
NORDIC

## INTRODUCTION

A father, a mother, a boy, a patient. What is the pattern of the Artist's life story?

Who is talking, who is judging, what is a child to make of all that happens around him?

1933. The man is dressed in the uniform of the Swedish Navy. The unconscious body lies thrown from a car by the side of the roadway.

Why are you talking like that, mum? What happened to your dreams?

»Nilsson the witch lives under us. She drags children into her apartment and tortures them. She sits there with Dahlin the gypsy, doing magic at the table.«

1954. The man looks back on his life. What is paranoia, mum? I want to go back to our home. It never ends.

Lars Embäck, the Artist, opens the door to his own life, like John Lennon searching for some truth. He gives us the voices, the records, his memories.

*Ulf Peter Hallberg*





## AFTERWORD

### LARS EMBÄCK AND THE MALMÖ ART TRADITION

Is there something definitively Swedish about the story and the artwork that make up Lars Embäck's *Family Life: The Artist's Hidden Secrets*? Is there something, to be yet more specific, definitively Malmöite about his work? While his often retrospective work glances back at his childhood in the Million Programme housing projects of 1960s Gothenburg, Embäck as an artist is a Malmö child. The Swedish art tradition that Embäck is heir to has its primary influences in French art from the first half of the twentieth century. From 1945–56, the Malmö Imaginist group consciously enacted and transmitted the ideas and working style of the French Surrealist André Breton. In one of the pages of the *Folie à Deux* exhibition workbook that forms the basis of the current book, you find three names scrawled in graphite pencil: Pablo Picasso, Louise Bourgeois, Marcel Duchamp. By Embäck's own account these are the three artists who've had the greatest influence on him. In his own words the characteristic that unites the three of them, and inspires him, is their »uncompromisingness«. Surrealist influences circulating on the home front while Embäck was a young student included Scanian artists C.O. Hultén, John Wipp, as well as Bertil Lundberg of the Imaginist group, founder of Grafikskolan Forum.

Educated at Malmö Konstskola Forum 1982–87, Embäck was among a group of artists who reached maturity in Malmö in the mid- to late-1980s, an era when, after the ideologically-dominated art scene of the 1970s, financial speculation in the art market had nurtured a renewed interest in oil painting and sculpture.

For emerging artists in Malmö, this era was characterized by rising rents in the city centre and a paucity of opportunities to exhibit their work outside the institutional space of the commercial gallery, whose management had to balance the concerns of sales with the desire to exhibit new and experimental art.

Lars Embäck became one of a group of young, talented artists who sought an alternative way to create and exhibit their art. In 1987 they formed the independent art collective Läderfabriken. As the name suggests, the collective operated out of an old disused leather factory, which housed around thirty artist studios as well as an exhibition space. From the beginning, Läderfabriken had an expressed inter-Nordic as well as international outlook. The collective received visiting artists from Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary and the UK. In 1988, Läderfabriken played host to guest-exhibitions from Danish collective Leifsgade 22 as well as a group of visiting British artists, whose work offered a British perspective on southern Swedish society.

Though driven less by ideology than by finding a practical solution to the absence of working and exhibition spaces, in the process Läderfabriken played its part in transforming the experience of viewing art. Audiences were compelled to travel out into the former industrial areas to view artworks right next to the rooms where they had been produced, rather than seeing them curated on the white walls of a city-centre gallery. Läderfabriken fell into a contemporary current in Scandinavia that was reconsidering the ways that art was exhibited and viewed.

In another part of southern Sweden, this movement had been pioneered a few years earlier by independent artists like Lars Vilks. His installation project *Nimis* – a series of tower-structures built from scrap wood on a

rocky, wind-beaten beach in the Kullaberg natural reserve – caused great controversy, having been erected without permission in a Special Protection Area. But the adventurous trek down the steep slopes was as much part of the experience as seeing the artwork itself.

In Malmö, Läderfabriken was forced to close in 1989 after losing a long struggle with the municipal authorities and the private owner to maintain their working and exhibition space in the old industrial quarters. The artist collective's contract was annulled, and the building later burned down and was demolished in the early 1990s.

But as the nineties progressed and Malmö developed from a decaying former industrial town into a burgeoning modern communications city, connecting the rest of the country to the continent via the new Öresund Bridge, Malmö's institutional art scene blossomed. Despite the financial crash in the early 1990s, new galleries such as Galleri Ping Pong (1996–) and Forumgalleriet (1992–98) emerged as important arenas for introducing the public to new artists and artistic forms. Malmö Konsthögskola, founded in 1995, likewise contributed to Malmö's renewed vitality as one of the leading centres of Scandinavian art. Its influence helped foster a greater engagement with postmodernist theory in the contemporary art coming out of Malmö, as well as an encouragement of new digital formats, including film, photography and internet-based art.

Lars Embäck's artistic progression has followed these historical currents at an angle. His pre-1996 work shows a great preoccupation with oil painting, often employing abstract motifs and not seldom featuring an anonymous figure turned away from the spectator, as in the painting *Fallen Angel* or, in the title of one 1989 exhibition, *The Other*. He has worked prolifically

with drawings and collage, as seen in this book. But he is perhaps most recognized for his installation works, often depicting domestic interiors with an undertone of tension and disharmony.

The Swedish conceptual art tradition in which Embäck works stretches back to the mid-1960s, when it was pioneered by artists like Bengt Rooke and Dick Bengtsson. But it was not until the end of the 1980s and early 1990s that it was recognized publicly by critics and curators. This era saw a flourishing of conceptual art in Scania, a movement that Embäck was part of with solo and group exhibitions like *The Other* (1989), *Swedish Appetite* (1992) and later exhibitions such as *Nota Bene* (2014), *Folie à Deux* (2014), *NOT* (2016), *It's Now That Counts* (2017), and *The Truth Inside and Out* (2019).

The mutually impacting relationship between the objective and the subjective is enduring in Embäck's work. In these latter mixed-media exhibitions, Embäck's subject is the memory of his childhood in Gothenburg in the 1960s, with a father and mother both scarred from individual traffic accidents and suffering from mental illness. The present work, *Family Life*, shares its title with the 1972 Ken Loach film of the same name, whose plot is informed by the psychiatrist R.D. Laing's theories about how psychosis can be catalysed by strenuous and negative family relations. The material in *Family Life: The Artist's Hidden Secrets* comes from Embäck's workbook for the 2014 exhibition *Folie à Deux*. The title »Folie à Deux« is a clinical term signifying shared psychosis, in which delusional beliefs or visions are shared and transmitted between two people. In Embäck's story, the youngest son finds comfort in his mother's delusions and becomes »addicted« to them, at the same time as they scare him. He identifies with the psychotic mother as the victim of social judgement and censure and as an adult seeks almost compulsively to re-create these conditions for himself:



»he could brace himself inside and torture himself by contradicting others when he was already at a disadvantage. Then he is with his mum once again, and lives euphorically in the connection with her.«

The origins of the series of exhibitions dealing with his childhood and his relationship with his parents can perhaps be traced in a comment made by Embäck regarding the exhibition *It's Now that Counts*: »There are wounds that don't heal with the passage of time.« Through Embäck's work, and the text of *Family Life* specifically, one gets the sense that the trauma of his childhood has followed Embäck through his adulthood, unresolved, and that his work forms part of the struggle to come to terms with how deeply it impacted his life and the paths it took. Part of the trauma, one senses, derives from the terror at the thought that an external event, an accident, a blow to the head, can cause you to lose your very self, which disappears never to return.

This is one of the terrible insights of Embäck's narrative in *Family Life*: that by losing their memories after their respective traffic accidents, father and mother have also therefore lost their identities. In *Family Life*, as in the series of exhibitions leading up to it, it is precisely to the past that Embäck turns in an attempt to find or perhaps forge the self. Embäck, the man and the artist, searches for the past subjectively – as it appears in his memory – and objectively – as it stares out at him from doctor's reports, photographs and newspaper clippings. As Embäck himself said of the *Folie à Deux* exhibition: »In the working process you gain access to situations that look foreign and impersonal even to yourself.« The past, or a version of it, is then re-created in the present as artwork so that past and present, public and private are complexly merged together. What Embäck said in a 1989 article about the viewer and the artwork resonates equally well with



his own backward-gaze in *Family Life*: »The adventure begins and ends in a delimited space at one particular time. And the mystery that arises opens itself like a flash of lightning – a borderline event we come upon in the distance between the tangible and the insecure.« In *Family Life*, remembered events out of the family past are interposed and juxtaposed with objective documents that inform the artist's understanding and interpretation of his memories, and by necessity, of himself. This is the truth, inside and out.

There is a line that might be drawn in Embäck's work in 1997. This year features in the latter portion of *Family Life*'s narrative as the year when the mother becomes blind and her earlier delusions return. This precipitates the turning point when the police are called to the family flat after the mother resists attempts to make her leave. The work that comes after this point, the retrospective installation exhibitions, form an enduring effort by Embäck to delve into his formative childhood memories and the effect of his parents' mental illness on his own life. Likewise, they are deeply shaped by two parallel processes that took place in this period. In 2000 Embäck began to meet a psychotherapist whom he would continue to see professionally for the next twelve years. After the end of his treatment, the two remained personal friends. With his psychotherapist's encouragement, Embäck slowly began to approach his past from a new, constructive angle and to address in writing and art the experience of examining his childhood memories. At the same time Embäck began to conduct research on his family and his childhood in the city archives, uncovering medical reports from his mother's and father's hospitalization, as well as records from the time when he as a child was committed to an orphanage – the subjective

and the objective here occur, as they do in the artwork, side by side. Some of the results are shown in the book. The first public result, however, came with the exhibition *Live and Let Die* (1999). The installation scenes evoke a sense of domestic eeriness, intimating the presence of an unknown darkness hiding behind the familiar exteriors. As Gert Aspelin in his catalogue commentary on the exhibition *Memory's Images* (2007) says: »Documentary material has great meaning for Embäck. It gives the theme a greater foundational resonance.« In Embäck's own words, »the artwork's energy derives from reality.«

But if much of Embäck's production since 1997 has been retrospective, it is not a retrospection coloured by nostalgia. In the same commentary, Gert Aspelin cites a poem by Gunnar D. Hansson, where the latter says that there is »an opposite to nostalgia that is a sort of backwards objectivity.« Nor is it a reconciliation of the objective and subjective accounts of the past, so much as an attempt to allow them artistically to run parallel with each other.

So the question remains, to what extent is Embäck a Swedish, or specifically a Malmöite artist? Glancing back through his work, the impact of his environment shows plainly in the titles of exhibitions like: *Malmö Blues* (1997); *Malmö, Malmö* (1988); *Swedish Appetite* (1992); *South City Drawings* (1999); *Insecurity in Sweden* (2002). There is a melancholy here, a claustrophobia that in the popular mind is commonly associated with Scandinavia. But by the same measure there are elements in *Family Life* that transcend the particular context: the neighbours' judgement of the mother, the misunderstandings that arise between them that force the family to move continuously; the individual's struggle to maintain autonomy and the anachronistic public health institutions' predilection for hospitalization and medication.

In its own right, Embäck's retrospective work straddles the cross-section of the historical currents of his time: employing a range of media that pull into question the boundaries between subjective and objective reality, as well as positing a rebellious counter-image of historical and personal realism, a troubled domestic scenography that challenges platitudinous conceptions of Scandinavia and Nordic art as being singularly pre-occupied with Nordic-noir melancholy, the region's unique light, or traditional folklore – clichés that have persisted into our day.

Like all stories, Embäck's gathers strength from the fact that it is particularized: it happened to him, growing up in the Million Programme housing projects of Gothenburg in the 1960s. But, like all stories too, it draws strength from the fact that his story could be anyone's, that the accidents that befell his parents, neither of them their fault, could have struck anyone and their lives been impacted similarly. His device of leaving all the characters unnamed, referring to them only as *the father*, *the mother*, *the boy*, *the patient*, creates a distance to the actual person and widens the story's net to capture something universal. The same effect is achieved in his installations, where the viewer is led almost against their will to identify with the objects displayed. The collection of mirrors in *NOT*, where the spectator's own reflection becomes part of the artwork; the ready-laid breakfast table in *Folie à Deux* or the hat racks in *Nota Bene* and *Slukminne* that waken associations in the viewer: »Hey, we had one just like that,« or »That's how our breakfasts used to look too.« Reflections that are inevitably unsettled by the follow-up thought: »But why is that chair lying on its side,« or »What's that coil of rope doing on the floor?« It becomes the story of a family that could be any family, and save for the fact that it happened in a Swedish home in the 1960s, could have taken place anywhere.

*William Crona*