

# The Malmö Konsthall

## Adam Caruso

AA Files (London, UK: Summer 2000)  
Issue 41, pp.30-34

I have seen three very different exhibitions in the Malmö Konsthall. In each, the manner in which the work was installed and the way in which the building's fabric was subtly modified to accommodate the show made the experience of the art powerful. This reciprocal relationship between the physical presence of a gallery and the work installed within it - flies in the face of current orthodoxies about the design of contemporary art space. Many recently designed galleries provide spaces of maximum size built with a minimum of tectonic detail. Any materials or assemblies that might make ambiguous the relationship between the installed work and the gallery are avoided. Whilst this is an improvement on many gallery designs of the previous forty years (a period characterised by gallery-machines that were more adept at expressing their own architectural manifestos than in accommodating the art that they were designed to house), the production of large, dematerialised galleries goes against a widely articulated preference amongst artists for working within characterful, already existing non-art spaces. In a study carried out in advance of the Bankside project, the Tate asked over 100 contemporary art practitioners whether they preferred to work in existing spaces or in purpose made art spaces. A majority expressed a preference for working in existing, adapted buildings.

The success of spaces like PS 1 in New York, the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, and the Hallen für Neue Kunst in Schaffhausen is testimony to an interest in engaging with varying scales of space and varying material conditions. The highly specific engagement between the physical context of these places and the work installed within them also provides a richness of experience for the viewer which is rarely achieved within the large, even architecture of the purpose built art institution. Yet, in a new building, how would one provide a spatial richness which is equivalent to that of an existing school, barracks complex or factory? How specific can an art space be if it is made for temporary exhibitions? The Malmö Konsthall is one of the very few purpose-built contemporary art spaces to engage with these issues.

Klas Anshelm's design for the Malmö Konsthall is said to have been inspired by a bus garage. The extremely slight presence of the building within the flat, expansive space of the city together with the unremitting blankness of its horizontal board marked concrete facades are, from a contemporary perspective, perverse formal decisions in the design of a major public building. Although this offhand treatment of architectural expectations is probably exactly what Anshelm intended, the exterior reticence and informality of the building has a significant effect on one's experience of its interior. One enters the Konsthall through the thinnest of thresholds, from an exterior space formed by a small inflection in the facade, a wooden bench cantilevered from the concrete wall and a simple canopy. Passing through the glazed doors of the wind lobby one enters directly into the art space. This lack of mediation between the space of the city and the gallery interior is only possible because of the protective carapace of the closed concrete exterior, an enclosure which serves to insulate the art within it from the unacceptably large and complex scale of the city. And yet, the points of contact between interior and exterior - the entrance and the long window looking out to the park - are so thin and membranous that the interior is nonetheless charged with an informality and lack of decorum that is a direct result of the abrupt manner of the building's enclosure.

The shock of entering directly into the gallery space is compounded by the expansiveness and brilliant whiteness of that interior. Its scale and purposefulness is effectively masked by the low and meandering line of the concrete enclosure. A generalised, large-scaled shed would not necessarily facilitate the installation of small and medium sized work. As a result, Anshelm has introduced barely perceptible complexities that allow for a rich range of inhabitations within this simple enclosure. The open plan is charged by three kinds of ceiling which establish overlapping spatial fields and produce room-like attributes even when the space is not divided by walls. The first of these ceilings is a neutral grid of small roof lights. The grid is sufficiently fine to ensure that rather than providing a visual connection to the sky, the hundreds of domes undermine the substance of the large-span roof structure and

fill this part of the interior with a brilliant and even light. The second ceiling territory is dominated by a monumental pitched volume which is glazed on its north face. Serving almost as a cupola within the gallery as a whole, the large glazing faces skyward and is both frame and window to a swathe of nineteenth century buildings located across the street, powerfully affecting the character of the space below. The last territory is formed by the arcade-like space that runs parallel to the long, floor to ceiling window at the west of the building. The soffit of this space is flat so that one is drawn to the trees and wide street outside. In this way, the park is drawn into the gallery, and this 'shop window' also permits the gallery to be projected into the city.

These spatial types are not simply diagrammatic concepts. The arrangement of the building is sustained and extended by a coincident material intensity that is equally subtle and carefully judged. Whilst being struck by the size and lightness of the interior, one also notices the timber floor that runs continuously through the art spaces. A spanning structure of raw, untreated spruce boards it establishes the generous extent of a factory floor. The matte, untreated surface is redolent of the wood block floors that are still common in northern European industrial buildings. The twice yearly washing with lye soap is almost palpable in the light, scrubbed surface - a surface which is clean but somehow never finished. Anshelm was proud of the flexibility and often exploited potential of the building's suspended floor, but it is its rawness, its presence as structure, which most powerfully contributes to the provisional and open-ended character of the art space.

Along with the floor, the hundreds of domed roof lights are the most significant tectonic element of the gallery interior. White painted plywood sheets, fragile and thin, have been stressed into a slightly concave shape to form the interior of the lights. The stressing of the surface gives a consistent shape to the hundreds of domes and is evident from the exposed corner L-clamps and the gaps at the edges of the sheets that hint at a hidden volume above. The air supply diffuser, socket outlet and simple exposed lightbulbs further emphasise that this is an independent floating layer, enclosing a structure and services zone, rising up to meet the glazing elements and providing a ceiling to the gallery. What could easily have been a case of too many things happening in too small a space, instead becomes a surface of great control and delicacy, radiant with an ethereal, almost islamic light.

As is the case in many other temporary exhibition galleries, the wall linings at Malmö have a provisional and used quality - timber boards which have obviously been repeatedly overpainted, cracked joints at times separating and coming out of plane. While such details are distracting and seem to be defects in other buildings, here they are consistent with the whole, quietly proclaiming the robust flexibility of this art space. You can do a lot to this space without negating its quiet dignity, its particular character of place.

There is very little about the Malmö Konsthall that is literally like a garage, warehouse or factory. Structure is completely hidden, servicing elements are discretely and flexibly integrated into the simple linings which form the interior. There is no hint of making a representation, or pastiche, of an industrial space. Instead, Anshelm has made a space of an equivalent character, a place for production, a place that can be robustly engaged with and altered.