

Malin Pettersson Öberg

« There is nothing ordinary in the world »

by Constance Moréteau – August 2010

There is nothing ordinary in the world is the title of a project by Malin Pettersson Öberg (Swedish artist, born in 1979) based on investigations in one of the Chinese shopping areas of Paris, located along the street *Rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin*. The work remains representative of some other of her projects, devoted to foreign communities situated in Paris, whose identities are reflected by means of the shop window, of the sign.

Under the commercial sign, the relationship between immigrants and locals always appear more flexible, dedicated to the exchange, less ideological and more transparent. However, Malin Pettersson Öberg has been interested in populations where the past and present relations with France vary from one to the other. The syncretism is not nearly as obvious as it might appear with globalization, for the Chinese community, or within a more French context for the African community *Quartier de la Goutte d'Or*.

Currently the artist lives and works in Stockholm, but she keeps a very strong bond with Paris where she was the assistant of German artist Ulla von Brandenburg during one year and a half. For Malin Pettersson Öberg, the coexistence of several immigrant populations contrasts with the much more homogeneous human geography of Stockholm, following a frame of mind that she considers conformist.

« *Architecture is sign* » wrote Roberto Venturi in 1972 in *Learning from Las Vegas* about the neon signs invading the city. This we understand by reading the numerous signs transcribed by the artist. But she adds a healthy dose of suspicion to the statement in order to capture a less triumphant environment than the heterotopia of Nevada where everything is assumed to follow the order of the artificial. The font used for the title *There is nothing ordinary in the world*, borrowed from the format of text message, gives the impression of a statement that above all could have been sent by SMS, written while walking. An urgent need opposed to the self-styled neutral environment that we are expected to perceive.

As usual, the peregrinations of Malin Pettersson Öberg result in a book, whose under title for the Chinese community is: *A text about a shopping district in Paris, urban rumors, China and the border between fiction and reality*. It was published in 2007 after her Erasmus studies in Paris at the *Arts Décoratifs*. In this particular case, it presents itself as a combination of text, numerous photographs and the reproduction of names of stores, some which are excerpts of their original signs (online pdf : <http://malinpetterssonoberg.com/texts/>). Their initial graphic design is always kept by this artist, whose initial education was conceived at the *Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design*, a college specialized in applied arts, after a painting practice that she completely abandoned. Note that the project as well was realized as an exhibition, thanks to the work of the Swedish curator Yuvinka Medina.



Détail de *There is nothing ordinary in the world*, 2007



There is nothing ordinary in the world, 2007

The text has become very important for Malin Pettersson Öberg who thereby may play on the gap between text and image in order to enlighten her visual universe, her musical, artistic and literary references. She does not hesitate to quote or refer to certain artists convoked since the beginning of her practice, or when these artists are mentioned to her by critics or curators.

Thus, we can note the importance of the work of New York-based artist Zoé Leonard, put in relation to her own work by the curator Zoë Gray. The comparison seemed obvious to her, and as a result she has invested a great deal of interest in her work. Both share an artistic approach as observers and take a considerable amount of photographs in which the storefronts occupy a prominent place, as in the series *Analogue* (1998-2009) by Zoé Leonard. However, the latter is more interested in the gentrification of cities like New York, the disappearance of small businesses in the Lower East Side where the process is visible, while Malin Pettersson Öberg questions a reality given as such, almost perceived as natural. For Zoé Leonard, it is a more ethnological, less distanced undertaking than in the work of Malin Pettersson Öberg who employs the format of the book in order to show the displacement of the sign from one space to the other.

If the documentation constitutes an essential phase of the work for Malin Pettersson Öberg, she discards the documentary turn initiated by the the Anglo-Saxon context, which is always searching for the next *turn*. She neither wants to create concrete situations of exchange, nor a documentary aesthetic in order to inscribe herself in the current fashion. The imaginary remains an essential fact, as the subtitle quoted above states. In this regard, the Fourth Berlin Biennale *Of Mice and Men* that the artist visited in 2006, appeared to her as unexpected amongst the hegemony of relational aesthetics, which prevails even though it has been strongly criticized :

« *We believe that reality and our surroundings can be described and thereby transformed by much more complex and enchanting words and images.* » For instance, to use the language of SMS is indeed to deploy an efficient and instant means of communication, and moreover to create a new and more condensed language which fosters dual readings and always dramatizes the initial tone. Paradoxically, the meaning emerging has changed... But it translates a certain creativity and humour that we can only laugh about afterwards!

Communication in all directions, globalization and illusionary harmonies

The compression of messages can lead to aberrant meanings. With an obvious malice, Malin Pettersson Öberg likes to detect this at different levels, amongst certain articles sold in Chinese wholesale stores in Paris. This time, it's marketing strategies used to demonstrate the assimilation of cutting edge fashion in a globalized world, where all decisions need to be



Fanny Look (There is nothing ordinary in the world), wall painting en peinture acrylique, 2007, exposition dans la boutique Whyred North, Stockholm

fast. What was first aimed to be an efficient language, ends up in expressions such as *License Kid*, *Happy Little* or *2 Speed Fun...*etc. Finally, the attempt to fuse two words reveal the impossibility to reduce everything to nothing at all, something that the current zeitgeist continuously makes us believe. The Californian artist Paul McCarthy was criticizing this phenomenon by referral to the theme parks, and especially to Disney Land. In *Documents* (1995-1999), via an interplay between a set of photographs from the park and some images portraying other worlds, sometimes ideological, he restaged the disparities which had been ignored between antagonistic worlds. In this process, we depart from « the neutral to the indeterminate » as Xavier Vert nicely summarizes it in the catalogue « *Louis Marin. Le pouvoir dans ses représentations* » (2008). And by other means, it seems that Malin Pettersson Öberg brings us to dissect these names in order for the same shift to occur.

From here, we arrive at better understanding the parallel economy of these shops, which are often presumed to be a cover for mafia activity. Are we really dealing with an investigative work? It is definitely an investigation process, but its aim is beyond the unveiling of facts, as we already know these facts. The artist above all invites us to question the visual regimes that are proposed to us. Who else than an artist can reveal the artificiality of certain display devices? The attention of Malin Pettersson Öberg had been caught up by a geometrical arrangement of jeans hung on the wall, preceded by all the cardboard boxes filling up the shop, despite of the unfriendly ambience in there. The comparison of this arrangement with an art installation comes to her immediately. She opens an artistic realm as a symptom to this fishy situation!

In order to invite us to reflect upon the relationships between France and its former colonized populations, a more complex and delicate issue, Malin Pettersson Öberg decides to sew. She devotes herself to the superposition of words and values, and we find the same appearingly naïve freshness as with the names of the Chinese shops. So, in 2008, Malin Pettersson Öberg realizes *Untied (Flag)* in collaboration with Sébastien Berthier. The artist also participates in another collective project conducted by the Iranian artist Shirin Sabahi, an ongoing Internet-based project where the members of the « *group etc.* » (<http://www.group-etc.net/>) contribute to a collective, literary piece where everyone writes a chapter each, without revealing his or her identity. *Untied (Flag)* has been exhibited in Paris as part of the 2009 edition of Jeune Création, at 104. The format of the flag takes on the exact measurements of the French flag. One way of apprehending it is to seize it according to its tripartite division, supported by the dominant colours: blue, white, red.

This regularity is however challenged by the rich nuances of fabrics sold in the African community *Quartier de la Goutte d'Or*, as well as by the connotations carried by the many phrases which seem to float on the surface of the flag. The latter are quotations of the commercial signs in the district and they embrace several meanings, which, for the majority, deal with being elsewhere (*Espoir Exotique*) and with otherness (*Le Bienvenu*). More precisely, the visitor is confronted with more or



Fanny Look (There is nothing ordinary in the world), 2007



Untied (Flag), patchwork, 2008



Untied (Flag), édition 2009 du salon Jeune Création au 104

less reconcilable realities, that deal with exoticism (*Mille et un voyages, Océans du Sud*), imperialism (*Le Diplomate, L'Empire, Fair and white*) etc. Other concepts (*Avenir Cosmétiques*) seem more or less relevant to the categorization which reveals itself as a true symbolic violence.

But precisely, symbolism is intrinsically associated with the flag, and one notes here that this primary purpose is undermined, made more elastic by a certain dissociation between content and form. One oscillates between softness and bitterness without that any final value is imposed. Are we dealing with an undeterminable harmony? The tone is more indirect than in *There is nothing in the ordinary world*. The absence of text, of attached publications, goes in this direction, leaving the impressions in a stronger state of latency than in the other work.

Good Luck, Paris (By Heart): figures of the palimpsest

The reflections on temporality also irrigate the works of Malin Pettersson Öberg. They are at the heart of her work *And in my heart there is...* (*Asnières*), which was achieved in 2007 after her discovery of a dog cemetery in Asnières, from which she transcribed into wall paintings the affectionate greetings left by the owners of the deceased animals, on the walls of Bonniers Konsthall and Galleri Konstfack in Sweden.

However, I would like to dwell on another of her publications, *Good Luck* (online pdf: <http://malinpetterssonoberg.com/texts/>) realized in 2008 during a residency in Rotterdam, and emerging from her wanderings through the streets of the city, but also through Amsterdam and Utrecht. This book extends Malin Pettersson Öberg's reflections on the Chinese district while proposing new configurations that mark a new stage in her approach. The red light districts are part of her itinerary, as the artist is still attracted by the urban image of a community. She takes numerous color photographs. Those are later reproduced in black and white and in very small size, in order to shape a regular pattern. Certain texts from the signs are then removed from their initial context, recolored and enlarged. They are printed in full page, each page comprising only one sign. The black and white, the small format, the more compact structure of the first section gives a background to the notion of indeterminacy that I rediscover when the artist refers to Barthes's *punctum*, the notion he proposes in *La Chambre Claire* (1980). By looking at a photograph, it sometimes happens that we are deeply affected by certain elements or configurations without being able to identify the exact reason. For *Good Luck*, initially, this effect is marked by the distancing produced by the layout of the first part of the book.

The only way to react then is to pass through creation. The second section corresponds to this step. The mystery is not solved, but the frustration becomes constructive. At the very last page of the book, some pictures of the exhibition, which offers a further extension of the project, show the *face à*



And in my heart there is (Asnières), wall drawing en peinture acrylique, 2007



And in my heart there is (Asnières)



Good Luck, 2008



The text in this book is a collection of small, black and white photographs of urban scenes and signs. The text is a collection of small, black and white photographs of urban scenes and signs. The text is a collection of small, black and white photographs of urban scenes and signs.



Good Luck, 2008

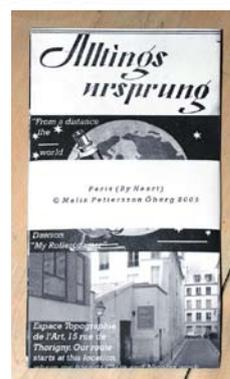
face confrontation between the black and white photographs and the wall paintings of the signs, in colour.

So, we notice the persistence of certain themes and formats of the artist, and to conclude this portrait, her last project *Paris (By Heart)* might shed light on the idea of the palimpsest. Firstly, it relates to the artist's interest in nostalgia which was briefly approached in *And in my heart there is... (Asnières)*. Her evocations of romantic art or art nouveau also go in this direction. For example, in her written statement achieved during her studies in 2007, art nouveau illustrations are borrowed from an edition of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* to accompany the text. Secondly, interpretation is an artistic object, and for this reason, it is an unfinished object. In her own *Artistic Statement* (online pdf: <http://malinpetterssonoberg.com/texts/>) she includes numerous emails that were exchanged between her and others on the meaning of art, on her practice as if she left that an open question, where also the coming backs are allowed.

However, nothing is more open than *Paris (By Heart)*. It comes in the shape of a map, and was originally published in an art magazine called *Ex 1000 cm2 Art Magazine*, released in 100 copies in the autumn of 2009. On one side, a bird view of a few house blocks, and on the other a new patchwork of views on Paris, photographies of showcases, a picture of *Untied (Flag)* over which different texts overlap: a few personal remarks about Paris, quotes, a series of definitions on the notion of *original*, of *fabric* (in French, it can be translated as tissue, structure, society...), and of *itinerary*. All this seems to show the choice of a necessary slowness in order to enable to move between the different layers of reality, to unfold the threads and oxymorons.

Visit Malin Pettersson Öberg's website: <http://www.malinpetterssonoberg.com/>

View Malin Pettersson Öberg's CV: <http://www.malinpetterssonoberg.com/biography/>



Paris (By Heart), 2009, recto



Paris (By Heart), 2009, verso

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