

## Johnny Herbert in conversation with Ulf Lundin

**Ulf Lundin talks with Johnny Herbert about *From Darkness* (2002) and his exploration and interest in a photographer's changing position of power and responsibility and the importance of that position for what he calls "common space."**

*Johnny Herbert: How have you been during the pandemic period? Have you been in Sweden?*

*Ulf Lundin:* Work-wise the pandemic period has been pretty much as usual, except that everything fun has been cancelled or postponed. I was supposed to have an exhibition at Stockholm City Museum that was due to open in April; it opened last week but with no opening party. I was scheduled to teach in Belgrade for a week and will also probably not be allowed to go to Bergen for the opening at Kunsthall 3,14. But, on the other hand, I can ride my bicycle to the studio and do work. I guess that's an advantage you have as an artist; you're used to coming up with your own assignments with the chance of maybe getting paid in the distant future.

Life is a bit duller. You meet fewer people and you're a bit isolated. I also find it hard when you don't know when it's going to end. First you thought life would be back to normal in a couple of weeks, then six months, and now you're not sure if its ever going to be the same again.

*Johnny Herbert: I would have thought that, as an example, children could be permanently affected by the pandemic—that it instigates or reinforces a sense of fear of people around them. It is of course also having a severe psychological effect on those struggling with isolation.*

*Ulf Lundin:* Yes, it's hard to say what effect it will have on young people in the future. I asked my 17-year old son if it had changed his view of people around him and he wasn't sure if it had changed at all, but I'm not so sure. I was young when AIDS was something new and it definitely changed your view of sexuality to something that could be potentially dangerous. Things like fellow human beings, intimacy, and meetings were previously solely positive but are today suddenly risky.

*Johnny Herbert: The approach of the Swedish government to the pandemic has been very much different to other countries, relying more on public health recommendations rather than enforced lockdown measures. What's it like living on the inside of this?*

*Ulf Lundin:* I think that the foreign view of the Swedish strategy is that it's more different than it really is. If you read newspapers from abroad it's made out like Sweden isn't doing anything, but a lot of measures have been taken. However, as you say, they are more recommendations than enforced measures—people in Sweden (not everyone, but most) tend to follow recommendations from authorities.

*Johnny Herbert: The notions of risk and heeding authorities that you've brought up perhaps begin to hint at some of the conditions for your practice too. With regards to the video work you will show at Kunsthall 3,14, *From Darkness* (2002), can you say something about what you were interested in exploring?*

*Ulf Lundin:* The idea for *From Darkness* came from my bachelor party: My friends arranged a surprise party for me in a small village on the west coast of Sweden. It was late and we were going to our cabin to sleep. There was a wedding in the village and there were no taxis available so one of my friends bribed a newspaper delivery truck to drive us. We were all sitting

back in the darkness in his covered truck. I took some pictures in the darkness with a flash during the trip. My memory of that journey was that we had a fun trip, but when I looked at the negatives my friends had that odd, numb look on their faces. I found it really interesting and started to explore it.

When you make portraits of people, you always get images where someone makes a strange face and looks funny or less beautiful—but this is different. When you look at all the pictures I've made during this project, there is something common in the look of all the sitters. It's not a particular face, but a state of mind. It's interesting to sit in total darkness for half an hour. After a while you start to lose the feeling of how you look. If I sit in front of someone else, talking, I have a pretty good idea how I look, but alone, in the darkness, you tend to lose that. Do I sit straight? Is my mouth open or closed?

*Johnny Herbert: Am I right in assuming that participants for From Darkness were aware that they were going to have their image taken as part of an artwork and that it was a studio-setup? The tweaking of the conditions of portraiture is something present in some of your other work too. For example, a more recent piece of yours, Here You Are (2015), also explores conditions of portraiture but veers more towards a kind of image capture device. For that piece, a portrait-sized piece of 'smart glass' (glass which could be instantaneously switched from frosted to clear with an electrical switch) was mounted in a street-facing window and used as a projection screen (when frosted), briefly being switched into a transparent window through which a photograph of someone coming close to the window was taken and then immediately projected through the back of the glass onto the re-frosted glass. You have also published some of the images you took in Here You Are on your website.*

*Thinking about this a little more in terms of the technologies of 2020, would you agree that the social sense—we might even say the social contract—of photography has changed radically in the last 10–15 years due to social media and ways that people willingly distribute and publish their image and images of their lives? Walking down a busy street today means frequently being (unwittingly) captured in an image or video. The process of seeking permission to publish that was an ethical standard to which photography was held accountable has been increasingly skewed toward the imperative to produce—to be active (and happy) and to want to show others that activity—that overwrites thoughts of permission or ethical commitment.*

*I feel that some of your work explores this technology-driven alteration of social contracts. Is this something you've thought about?*

*Ulf Lundin: Here You Are was primarily a performance, but the images that were taken during the process had a quality in themselves that I didn't anticipate so I chose to publish them on my webpage. The people in these images didn't know that they were being photographed, but, as you assumed, the models in From Darkness were aware of what was about to happen but didn't know exactly when a photograph would be taken; half an hour in total darkness is a quite long time.*

I think that taking a photograph of another human being is always an act of power, even if the model is aware of what you're doing. As a photographer, one can choose when to capture the image and what one wants to distribute around the world. This is something that many photographers are trying to hide—they talk about identification, meeting, and intimacy. At university, I had a teacher that told students to ask the model to raise their arm so you could see their armpit because that gave the image an air of intimacy. But that has nothing to do with real intimacy, that's just a gesture.

*Johnny Herbert: Can you expand on that a little, and what you understand as 'real intimacy'? It seems important, particularly given the current pandemic.*

*Ulf Lundin:* In documentary photography, intimacy is the ideal. You, as a photographer, spend a lot of time with your subjects. They know you and what you want to do and you know and understand them and have the ability to depict them in a righteous manner. Of course, real intimacy is possible but your position as a photographer is still a position of power and it comes with a great responsibility. And, as I said, there are ways to fake that intimacy.

So, in several projects I have tried to emphasize the position of the photographer instead of hiding it. I think that the video *Station* (1999) is the most obvious example of this. It is recorded on the railway station in Gothenburg. I had my video camera on a tripod and was standing maybe two or three meters in front of people sitting and waiting for their trains. Without asking or talking to them, I filmed them. In the video I have used the footage where there is an intense contact between the person on the video and the camera, whether they are looking into the camera or not looking into it at all. I don't think that it would be possible to do *Station* today. One of the reasons is that people wouldn't accept that I stand so close to them whilst seemingly filming them. They would protest much more today than they did twenty years ago. There is a big difference photographing in the city today. There are a lot more aggressive people. People think that they have the legal right to decline to be in a picture, which they haven't. So, on one hand, we're sharing photographs from our lives more and more, but I feel that we simultaneously want to be in control of the image we're sharing.

Among photographers, I quite often hear a discussion about what is okay to publish and what is not okay. I think that discussion is definitely alive but we share so many more pictures today than twenty years ago. Lately, I even heard from several different people that they think it should be forbidden to publish any picture of a recognizable person without their consent. In a way that makes sense, but I think it would be a very high price to pay for our privacy.

*Johnny Herbert: Can you say more about that high price?*

*Ulf Lundin:* I just think that it would be much more difficult to depict our world in an interesting way if you can't photograph other people in public space. Look at the history of photography and take away the images that feature people that don't know that they are being photographed. I think that that would change our view of our history. In the area of documentary filmmaking they talk about an informed consent: you're supposed to approach the person you want to depict, tell them what you want to do, and how you are going to use any footage of them. That might work for a documentary filmmaker but not always for a documentary photographer—it's so much more about freezing time and catching the moment.

*Johnny Herbert: I read in your responses to the questions in the book Kunstens Frågeformulär [Artists Questionnaire] that Philip-Lorca diCorcia's work Heads was a work you admired. Can you describe this work and say something about it that interests you? The reason I mention it is that it provoked some controversy when one of the photograph's subjects tried, and lost, a court case against diCorcia because the use of the subject's image was made without his consent and contravened his religious beliefs. I haven't looked into the case in detail, but I'm actually surprised diCorcia won—surely someone would have to sign a disclaimer before it's "published" as an artwork? (I think the grey area was that it was considered as an artwork and was therefore not tried under the same ethical guidelines as an image not considered an artwork. Even if there were signs indicating that the public thoroughfare had become a place of image capture, surely, if you're going to select an image from thousands (as he did), it's your ethical responsibility to check with that person that it's*

*okay? I mean, I'm sure diCorcia's selling these for a pretty sum and that kind of impingement and exploitation basically reinforces the public fear (amongst other latent traumas, some of which are coming to the surface during this pandemic) of public surveillance most recently exemplified in the cases of online data-tracking.*

*Ulf Lundin:* diCorcia put up studio lights on scaffolding in the public space of Times Square in New York; so, he lit his "scene" as a studio space. He then took portraits of random people passing by without asking them for permission. I guess he's using a pretty long lens so I don't know if the models are even aware that they are being portrayed. This series is a good example of images that couldn't have been made if you had to approach your subject and ask for permission. I would say that a big part of the quality of this series is that they are unaware that they are being photographed. The images are a lot about that private moment in the crowd on Times Square.

I'm not familiar with the US laws but in Sweden you can do what diCorcia did without having the person on the image signing a disclaimer. As an artist or a journalist you are allowed to do a lot. Just open any newspaper and you see images of people having their picture printed without their knowledge. And very often in more exposed situations than walking the streets of New York. Why are we provoked by diCorcias images and not by the ones we see in a newspaper? He photographs something that anyone who is on Times Square at that moment can see. Is it because of that private quality of the pictures? It is of course unfortunate that the man you mention felt that this was against his religious beliefs and that he felt exploited—he is exploited. But, then again, the price of making such a thing illegal is very high, I think: no Lee Friedlander, Robert Frank, Cartier-Bresson, Vivian Maier or Philip Lorca diCorcia of the 21st century.

You mention online data tracking: I think we have more reasons to fear that and surveillance from governments and larger corporations. I think our right to photograph and film in public space is also a question of democracy. That is problematic if "big brother" can film us but we can't film "big brother".

*Johnny Herbert:* I see your point. It seems like it's an ethical question for which "big brother"—presumably we're talking about the state, here—need not be considered the setter of the premises.

*In developing devices or scenarios of image capture and portraiture in your work, I find it interesting to think of it as an oblique exploration of these technology-driven ethical questions away from judicial decree on whether something is illegal or not. In that sense, I find myself thinking of From Darkness as an invitation to consider the changes in consent around the making of images and, more speculatively, to imagine how prolonged spells of "social distancing," not to say mass death, will alter unconscious social habits, the senses of intimacy you mention, and, therefore, resulting imagery.*

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