



MARJA PIRILÄ
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IN STRINDBERG'S ROOMS

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SERLACHIUS MUSEUM GÖSTA

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In Strindberg's rooms #6, 2017

DARK RAYS OF LIGHT

Päivi Mehtonen

Can something originate from darkness or *nothing*? Where do matter and life come from – and can one change into the other? The history and present of the photograph have included the investigation of the world's structure and motion. Marja Pirilä's *In Strindberg's Rooms* is something of a tribute to the tradition of photography. It has also acquainted the viewer with the language of nature, to which humankind is becoming blind as the light of knowledge increases.

The name of an exhibition is only a name, but it tempts one to look for connections and differences between views belonging to two different ages. Marja Pirilä's *In Strindberg's Room* is a series for which a residency apartment in Grez-sur-Loing, France, served as a dark room. August Strindberg (1849–1912), one of Sweden's most prominent and controversial writers, also worked there in his time. Strindberg, moreover, was a pioneer of early photography, who summed up his method in the 1890s as follows: *Först spekulera, sedan experimentera* – “First speculate, then experiment!”

Marja Pirilä is thoroughly familiar with the history of her equipment and revitalises the opportunities they present. Her method may be just the opposite: first experiment, then speculate. The images are not only ‘taken’, rather they are ‘received’ as a continuous stream within the *camera obscura*, as if by chance and miraculously. Then selected, organised, printed. The final series of images is the product of the slow distillation of *chiaroscuro*, light and shade. Infinite and finite combine and take form.

Schooling in the natural sciences – Strindberg's chemistry, Pirilä's biology – is combined by both with self-built photographic equipment and a desire for experimentation. Science or art alone is not enough; they cross-illuminate each other. “When I was studying biology, with all that theoretical knowledge, I came to the realisation that I was losing



In Strindberg's rooms #2, 2017

my ability to identify with nature," Pirilä has written. Strindberg's images with *camera obscuras* and pinhole cameras, on the other hand, were motivated by a distrust of camera lenses and the human eye. They distorted the image of reality. Strindberg, therefore, sought photochemical means of depicting (starry) skies or crystallising liquids without the intervention of the photographer – as nature itself would depict them, as part of the cycle of celestial bodies, life and death.

But can nature depict itself? Someone, indeed, prepares the photographic compositions and presents the images as 'pictures', such as now in Pirilä's *In Strindberg's Rooms*. Chance and the photographer's fumbling within the dark *camera obscura* are combined with the focused light-awareness of the images, and also the literary and photo-historical references of the works.

⊙ EYE IN THE HOLE

August Strindberg was influenced by both old natural philosophy and (al)chemistry as well as the natural sciences of the time. "The sun is like gold. They are both portrayed by the same symbol ⊙." In artists' circles, it was also a symbol of the spiritualism fashionable at the end of the 19th century. In contrast with the philosophies of reason and utilitarianism of the time, different states of matter and signs of the presence of spirits were sought. In still older natural philosophy, the ⊙ symbol meant the inexpressible eye of eternity, ultimately the divine gaze. Humans looked at the sky and the sky looked back. Light, sun, gold – Strindberg's belief in the "correspondences" of matter and spirit encouraged both pictorial and literary experimentation.

The photograph of the 2010s lives in a different world of visual abundance and knowledge formation. Still, the question of nature, matter and spirit is more burning than ever. Marja Pirilä is an insatiable portrayer of sunlight and clouds. *In Strindberg's Rooms* gives viewers the opportunity to wonder at light as a concrete fact. Within a *camera obscura*,



In Strindberg's rooms #4, Maija and Miikka, 2017

materials absorb and reflect light or shade in different ways: skin cells of different-aged people, tattooed skin, a dark hoodie, paper, walls... At the same time, the stream of light reflected from outside into the camera and chamber blurs the boundaries of objects and things. What is the foreground and what is the background? The subject and context of the photograph? The images become nearly abstract: the present, immanent light and darkness. As the pioneers of avant-garde confirmed in the early 20th century, the most realistic art is at the same time the most abstract. The more detailed or wider the zooming of reality, the more abstract the image of it. Or to quote Marja Pirilä's expression: *an overrealistic (suurrealistinen) image.*

In the images of *Strindberg's Rooms*, the exterior and interior are overlapping, as freeze frames. But, in the photographic process, they were also successive, as a continuous event. The clouds of the images are both strong metaphors and material states from which one can observe weather conditions, times of the day and various cloud types.

The spatial arrangement of the human images is a result of the *camera obscura's* technical slowness and long exposure times. Everyday authenticity or "psychological portraiture" (of Strindberg's images) is not the manner of representation of these images. Open or closed eyes bring to mind a camera lens, but also the painting tradition in which the closed eyes of the subject have symbolised a focus on the mystery of being, on the invisible as well as the visible.

Pirilä's human images lack a direct self-portrait and self-exploration directed at the creator, one of the most used means of art, to the point of exhaustion (of the viewer). Instead, the images transmit a strong implied author: the selected viewpoints and viewing angles materialise values, norms and impressions that the real creator has consciously and unconsciously produced. *In Strindberg's Rooms*, we are in a reduced built environment, with no sense of habitation and everyday life. An exceptionally everyday person has been recorded in a stream of images coming from outside the rooms; one of Pirilä's hat images features a man in a streetscape.

LIGHT WRITING

Sunlight is also reflected in Western thinking and language. *Heliotropism* is the tendency of some plants to react to movements of the sun. In language, traditional light-oriented metaphors are also called heliotropes, when we speak of the activity of the human mind (such as 'light of understanding' or 'enlightenment'). In the history of thought, the *camera obscura's* reflection image has, on the other hand, been considered to be a strong metaphor for sleep, illusion or the subconscious (Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud,



Sarah Kofman). As if the dark box would isolate only the image, and actual reality would inevitably be excluded from the picture. But the propagation of light in a medium is not an illusion, and the boundaries of the box are not the boundaries of our world.

Instead of, or alongside, dreaming, people are set in Pirilä's images also in ethical and social contexts, alone or others. Sometimes a character is merged with a wall image, as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's impressive classic text *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). It is a story of a closed room, a limited relationship with the outside world, and of images that a disintegrating self sees in a wall. Pirilä's images have been stripped of direct temporal and positional coordinates, whereupon viewers and their mental images may become the subject of the photograph. *Camera obscura*: Refuge? Escape room? A drawing-room drama staged on a single set (the kind of which Strindberg is known to have developed)? With open or closed doors – a repeating theme both in Marja Pirilä's extensive output and in the history of photography – light shimmers when phantasmally unwelcoming, and when full of future promise.

The writing observer notes that *In Strindberg's Rooms* features lots of papers. A series of crumpled papers is an astonishingly beautiful light work or heliotrope, a village setting reflected on oblique paper surfaces. At the same time, the impression is like a broken mirror: is something in the crumpled paper image breaking or disintegrating? The images do not tell what blank or crumpled paper means to photographers. Are they possessed with the same spectrum of feelings as writers, for whom an empty sheet of paper (or its image in a word processor program) represents, on the one hand, joy and limitless opportunities and, on the other hand, the horror of a nothingness, only white on white, when a viable text does not come forth. The writer Strindberg knew a lot about that. Many of his texts on photography are from a time when artistic writing was in crisis.

But the *camera obscura's* stream of light will not run out, not until "the spinning planet on which all this happened dies" (Pessoa). *In Strindberg's Rooms* also brings to mind light mysticism, which is not explained by words. So let's be silent about which we cannot



In Strindberg's rooms #18, 2017

speak, because these photographs require the same from the viewer as from the creator: focused presence, expectation and new experiments.

LITERATURE KOFMAN, Sarah: *Camera Obscura of Ideology*. Transl. Will Straw. Ithaca, N.Y. 1999 © MEHTONEN, Päivi (ed.): *Illuminating Darkness. Approaches to Obscurity and Nothingness in Literature*. Helsinki 2007 © PIRILÄ, Marja: *Carried by Light*. Helsinki 2014 © STRINDBERG, August: "Om ljusverkan vid fotografering" [1896]; "Om direkt färgfotografi" [1896]; "Solrosen (Helianthus annuus): Analogier = korrespondenser = harmonier" [1897]; "Himlen och Ögat" [1896]. August Strindbergs Samlade Verk 36: *Naturvetenskapliga skrifter II*. Stockholms universitet 2003 © Talbot, Henry Fox: *The Pencil of Nature*. London 1844–1846.

MARJA PIRILÄ

Photographic artist Marja Pirilä has specialised since the 1990s in *camera obscura* technique and has introduced it into Finnish contemporary art. At the centre of her work are light, human being and interwoven spaces. In many of her series of photographs, Pirilä has explored the possibilities of *camera obscura* and has also expanded its use, as well as in photographs, to three-dimensional works, which she has produced together with photographic artist Petri Nuutinen.

Marja Pirilä's extensive production has been displayed in Europe, North and South America, and Asia as well as in contemporary photographic research. In 1986 Marja Pirilä graduated as a photographer from the University of Art and Design Helsinki, and as Master of Science from the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences at the University of Helsinki. Pirilä was awarded the State Prize for Photographic Art in 2000, and her work has been published in a retrospective photo book *Carried by Light* (2014).

PÄIVI MEHTONEN

Literature researcher Päivi Mehtonen (PhD, Adjunct Professor) has published and taught extensively on poetics, dissident and avant-garde literature, and the obscurity of language. Most of her work has been published in English.



In Strindberg's rooms #3, self portrait, 2017

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