



On Jadran Sturm
Skype talks: Lotte Beckwé with Åsa Lie and Mercedes Sturm-Lie
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'We are tourists' by Jadran Sturm & Åsa Lie, 2000
00:01:53 – 00:08:56

Åsa Lie: In fact, our main interest was politics, because politics is everywhere. If you study a religion, that is also something political. So, if you are interested in studying politics, to us it meant knowing as much as possible about the world. About anything and everything. Groups are little societies in themselves, and politics is about how people are doing things or not doing things, together. From the smallest groups or the family and outwards. It's sociology, history and psychology. A way of trying to understand the world. Jadran was not superficially that social, but very social on a deeper level, which means he didn't meet too many in everyday life, but he wanted to see and be near people. He was also completely independent, he would always work with art, no matter what. He had interaction with the world, in the way of watching news, listening to the radio, reading newspapers and books his whole life. He was interested in absolutely everything. If he happened to talk about religion or the Freemasons, then maybe one could think, oh, he's interested in that, and he was, but not more than in any other sect, "secret" group or religion. He was interested in the history of all the royal families, in rich people, famous people, he read lots of biographies, novels and about history in general, politics, philosophy and mathematics. And then his own life. He collected information from everywhere. So even if he wouldn't always have interaction directly with people, he would still be picking up things and listening. And a nice thing - we were a family and made a kind of agreement so that we could survive together. All three. Our life was ok. And it just turned out that it was easier for me to get work. He was more at home and cooked during the week, every evening. And he did the shopping. He was the house father. He loved it when I came home and told him about all the different people in the offices. And we talked about it, a lot of bullshit basically, you know, bla-bla. We had fun chatting. We used quite a lot of office material in our work. I often took advantage of the copy machine. Sometimes I asked if it was ok to take a few private copies. And then the talk of what happened or what I saw in the different jobs and experienced and what he was reading while I was there, we combined this in a sort of ... it became a combination of the domestic and the outer or political. We would mix, in most works, the near, the personal, the domestic with a view on or inclusion of the big world. We also opened our house and made exhibitions at home. Now we're talking about my and Jadran's work. I would say 50% of it was very personal and domestic.

As you can see in his installation, he would include the now of all the different things he was using - like the needles - because he had diabetes at the end. He had to take injections every day. He got cancer around 10 years ago and was very ill for at least two years. He had periods of extreme stomach ache. I kept saying to him, you have to get this checked. And he said - no, I'm trying to find alternative ways. He was looking into alternative medicine and how he could perhaps cure himself. But as time passed, suddenly one day he fainted in the street. Then it was really serious, it had been growing for a long time. Already from the beginning he used band-aids that you put on wounds. He would put them into drawings. He has used different kinds of material connected to his life before, I would say even before he came to Sweden. So, then he jumps to the now, the recent time and the moments of the end - the last time of his life - in the illness. He also used lots of objects, like these torn images and cards and things which we had lying around at home and all these plastic folders and different kinds of tape. Things we found at the Marché aux Puces / Vosseplein, where we passed every day and picked up stuff for free, little things, which, I guess, hundreds of artists have done. Lotte Beckwé: This installation is extremely intimate in the sense that it's domestic and biographical, personal history interwoven with things he found for free on the Vossemarkt. AL: Yes, and other things, historical things that he was interested in, like Queen Christina of Sweden, other artists and authors. LB: Maybe we can look at Christina^(fig.). Is that an image he found or looked for? AL: Yes. This one he probably looked for because he was reading about her. We also talked about her some years ago. Like I said, he was very interested in the royalties, which is an important part of European history. They may not be so important as an elite now, but historically, they were the rulers. Basically, it was just one big family sharing the whole of Europe, splitting it up between them. Russia was included. But Queen Christina was different. Someone who stuck out - an interesting character. She had an androgynous side. Some people didn't know if she was a man or a woman. She dressed like a man, but she was a woman. There are stories expressing uncertainty. Really. And she was perhaps lesbian or just bisexual. She refused to continue to be a queen. She went more personally into religion and demonstrated much stronger than most royalties her personal interests in culture and science. Which is why she collected art and other objects. Christina was controversial because of how she chose to live her life. She didn't live up to the expectations or let's say the demands. But at the same time, she did live up to expectations because she studied a lot and was very intelligent. She spoke a lot of languages. She knew many within the elite of Europe at that time, in the church and within the intellectual, artistic and learned elite, besides other royalties. So in a way she was a perfect diplomat, let's say, or in a sort of ideal way, the one who really moves around and knows things. She was not narrow minded in the way of thinking only about, for example, my nation, my crown, my religion. She was open. But this is just one of many. Jadran and I have been interested in several personalities, for example Pasolini. And they came forward here and there in our art.

'Fragment from 'Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma' by Pasolini, 1975
00:19:37 – 00:21:50

Mercedes Sturm-Lie: This one's also nice, 'when I'm deat dumpm in th sea so sarks can eat me'^(fig.). When I was a kid I asked my father – and I think all children ask their parents – how do you want to die? It's an interesting question. When I asked him, he always told me; "I want to be left somewhere in the desert, where animals will come and start to eat my body, ripping it apart, and I don't want anybody to find me." This is somehow related to this sentence. LB: Now, you won't dump him, but you will bring him to the sea? MSL: Yes, a part of him at least. His wish was to be cremated and for his ashes to be scattered in the Adriatic sea (Jadránsko morje) outside of Trieste. LB: And the 'IT well' that's written on top of that picture, does it refer to Italy? MSL: I don't think so, it's probably part of a sentence, because most of these pieces were made as part of a series. What's written before it? LB: 'Make it well'. MSL: Maybe it's a variation on 'did you kiss the spot to make it well', a sentence from 'Ulysses' by James Joyce. But in 'Ulysses', it's written as 'why didn't you kiss the spot to make it well?'. Jadran transformed it into 'did you kiss the spot to make it well'. The negative question becomes an open question.

LB: Yes, he got rid of the accusation. I think it's funny that he did, because dadaism and all avant-garde starts with an accusation. Also punk was a way of accusing the system and pointing out things that had gone wrong, so in that sense, it's pretty funny that he changed the accusation.

MSL: Yes, absolutely.

LB: Can you zoom in on the picture of the man on the mirror^(fig.)?

MSL: This spot is the place where he got cancer. And there's a condom here. This one's also nice, 'she bites his ear', and this looks like a Madonna, a bloody Madonna, and then there's this woman from a painting and playing cards.

LB: Yes, it's a Madonna with a split in the middle.

MSL: Yes, it's nearly like a vagina.

'Jadran's texts in the installation 'Did you kiss the spot to make it well'.
Read by Mercedes Sturm-Lie, 2020
00:26:00 – 00:30:47

'Смерти Больше Нем' by IC3PEAK, 2018
00:30:47 – 00:33:53

LB: If you go to places you're not supposed to be, places where junkies hang out, you typically see a lot of needles and condoms. You said Jadran never did drugs, but at first sight his work hints towards a junk lifestyle. MSL: Yes, in a certain sense. When he became sick, he started using band-aids in his works. The doctors often had to take blood to see if everything was ok, to check for cancer, so he would come home with band-aids on his arms and then he started using these in paintings and drawings. The needles are from when he became diabetic and had to take insulin injections three times a day. These band-aids and needles were a daily reality for him, and so was pain. The last years of his life he was in a lot of pain. The condoms are related to aids. When he was young he witnessed the outbreak of aids when a lot of people died. He did an exhibition at Espace0IN (located in my studio at the time), where he made an installation with three condoms hanging from a string, one filled with milk, one with sugar and one with salt. During the performance he stabbed them and the condoms fell to the ground. In that exhibition he talked a lot about his relationship to aids and the eighties. It's funny, because he had to go to the doctor very often, and there was always a basket with free condoms. So every time he went to the doctor, he just started taking them, two at a time. He ended up with a collection of condoms which he never really used for anything, until he started using them in his work. I think it's about the human body and being, the human hair, the shit, the needles and human pain. Physical and other pains, i.e. societal or psychological.

'Rövarsång / Bandit's song' by Mercedes Sturm-Lie at Dolle Mol, 1999
00:37:44 – 00:40:13

MSL: A lot of things that he used in this installation, such as the images, the prints of paintings and the portraits of young schoolboys were found at the flea market where he lived. Throughout my childhood the flea market was a place we went every week, and I got all my toys there. My father also met a lot of people at the flea market who he became friends with, who were very important to him, and whom I also grew up with. When I wrote my master essay, I dedicated it to Alex, George and José, which were three good friends of Jadran. Alex's parents were from Russia, but had to leave because of the revolution and it's aftermath. They came to live in Brussels when he was a young kid. He always wanted to become an Orthodox priest, but he couldn't study because his family didn't have the money, so he worked all his life, picking up trash from the streets every morning. And the other person, José, was Belgian, but his biological parents were Moroccan. His mother didn't treat him well. She used to lock him in a cupboard and hammer nails through it, things like that. He was taken away from his parents and put in an orphanage. Then he was adopted by a very rich Jewish family, where he grew up, but in that family there was incest happening. And then he became a jockey, riding horses. Hahaha LB: He told you all of this? MSL: Yes, he told my dad. So, then he was a jockey and made a lot of money, but decided to stop because the horses were treated very badly, and he didn't agree with the industry. He decided to go on a trip to Spain with his car. He just left the car somewhere, and started wandering through Spain, but what he didn't know was that someone stole the car and had an accident. The car went up in flames with the person who stole it still inside. So, everyone thought he was dead, even his family. A year later he came back to Brussels to his family home and when they opened the door they were completely shocked. Hahaha. Meanwhile one of his parents had died, so there was a huge inheritance which he hadn't received. He managed to get a part of that inheritance but he was very bad at being economical. If he had money he would spend it really fast. So he made a deal with his friend George. They put the money on George's bank account, ensuring that José couldn't spend it. Hahaha. He was often playing flute outside the church at Louiza, and at the flea market, making some pocket money and living on social security.

'Flute beast' (José, George and Jadran talking and José playing flute at Louiza), 2000
00:47:05 – 00:49:05

MSL: George was a Macedonian Jew and as a young boy he had been in a concentration camp, but survived and moved to Brussels. He collected metal objects. He was at the flea market every day, and if there was a screw on the ground, he would pick it up. His place, a house he shared with his wife, was filled with boxes full of metal screws and small metal pieces. I remember he was always looking at the floor whilst walking, looking for metal. And he was fascinated by Chinese characters. Anyways, they had this money on the bank account of George, so they would go out to different bars and drink beers. The idea was to use the money that was on the bank to have fun. George, Alex, José, my father and I would go to 'Clef d'Or' and other bars. It was really interesting, because Alex, the Russian, was interested in Christianity and Orthodox religion, he would always talk about this, and José, because he was adopted by this rich Jewish family was interested in the Torah. He would tell a lot of stories from the Torah and what different Hebrew words meant. And then there was George, the Macedonian, who was interested in Chinese characters. So you had three people interested in certain religions or languages^(fig.). In a way you could say that the flea market, and that's why I'm telling you this story, is a square containing many different worlds. The objects sold there are mostly from deceased people whose families don't want what's left, or maybe they don't have time to go through everything, so they hire one of these vendors to come and pick everything up. Then the vendors display it on the flea market and new people buy it. You can find all types of things and from different times. All kinds of people walk around there. There's this big diversity coming together in one place, which is what makes it so fascinating.

LB: It's also a bit like a graveyard, all the things lying there are from people who've just passed away, it's a transmission from the dead to the living.

MSL: Yes, and then Jadran found these school portraits of young boys. He told me he could identify with them, seeing as it could have been him as a child. They were possible portraits of himself. So he started drawing on them and painted a text over the portraits; 'all my friends are AEDD'. 'AEDD' could be seen as an acronym for dead; 'all my friends are dead'. He also painted parts of their faces with black ink^(fig.). I think this relates to when he lived in Sweden and was studying at the art school Konstfack. Someone at the school wrote 'Yugo Svartskalle' on a wall. Svartskalle is used as an insult in Sweden, meaning black skull or black scalp, and is used for anyone who's not accepted as Swedish, for example Finnish people, the Sami, Yugoslavians, Arabs, Africans...

'Rock N Roll Nigger' by Patti Smith, 1978
00:55:13 – 00:59:51

LB: Did you ever feel like, it's us against the world?

AL: We wanted to be a part of the world, but we felt that the world didn't want to let us. We wanted to participate and contribute, but as "us" - to be allowed to do that. If you would ask Jadran why he makes art, he would say, to be free. He was always talking about that, in the end it was that, freedom. Freedom of course meaning inner freedom, personal freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom from being judged. To be allowed to be the one you are, get respect, and be accepted. Freedom is about quite many things, it exists on many levels. Not just if you can go where you want, and say what you want. It's to be able to say what you want, but if nobody listens or they pretend that they don't hear you, then you're silenced even if you are allowed to say the words. For example in communist Yugoslavia you couldn't say things out loud, but when here in the West, Jadran experienced - and I agree, that you can talk as much as you want, but people often close their ears or pretend that they don't hear. This was very important in his and our experience, and I think this whole installation is very much about that. Jadran thinking; I don't care, I'm just going to do this now. I want to make these things clear, I want to finish off that and that, surround myself with it and have a look at it. It became a lot for him to exist with this installation. He said to Merzedes; I don't know, what do you think, this is maybe really a bit too intense. He had surrounded himself with himself and his life history. And at the very end he was also feeling like, oh-wow.

LB: It's a bit like what detectives do. They put things on a wall to solve a crime. Maybe autobiographical writers are doing kind of the same.

AL: What you just said is a good parallel. He wanted to surround himself with all these objects and images. I think he had everything lying around him, on the floor, on the tables, and then he was putting it together and hanging it up. He just took the tape he saw first. He didn't have five tapes, and then like, now I'm gonna take this tape and then I'm gonna take that tape, it was not an aesthetic choice. A lot of this is very much like - the first thing I see and NOW I have to hang this image HERE. He has even struggled with the tape, the tape is bending, you see, like this, in a hurry, his hands are shaking and it just had to be up there, now.

'Open Up And Bleed' by Iggy Pop, 1973
01:03:52 – 01:08:55

LB: In this installation there are many pictures of himself, his family and of his younger years. Is this a recurring theme or is it exceptional within this work?

MSL: It's kind of exceptional, that's also what makes it interesting. It's the last work he made, he was pretty weak and I think he suspected that this was the end. It must have cost him an enormous amount of energy to make this installation, there are so many works, at least fifty, maybe even more. He explicitly refers to his own life, which he didn't do before.

LB: For example, on this picture you see his mother, father, an elder brother, and then this girl-like kid. Is this Jadran^(fig.)?

MSL: His mother used to dress him as a girl. She actually wanted a daughter, not a second son, so she just pretended that he was a girl. He wore dresses and had long hair. When he was five years old, his father said "now it's enough, he's a boy, you can't keep dressing him like a girl", and took him to the hairdressers.

LB: His mother's wish to have a girl, was it related to her work, since she was working with lace?

MSL: No, I don't think it's related. She wanted to have a girl. An idea in her head. It's strange when you think about it, it was a little town, everybody must have been talking about it. "It's a boy, but she keeps on dressing him as a girl." When he was older, he used to help her with her hair and polishing her nails. His older brother never did anything like that. Jadran was always helping his mother. Even as an adult. She'd sometimes buy him clothes, and he would discover that they were too small and actually meant for girls. So yes, on this picture he looks like a girl.

AL: In this series, there are many things connected to Jadran's background, for example his mother was working with lace. Here I have a box full of a kind of patterns^(fig.). His mother was working every day. She was sitting, working with the lace. Since he was born until he left his home, his mom was always working with this. And because of that, she became very ill. She had big problems with her back and she was in hospital while he was a young boy. She was gone for a long time and he had to be taken care of by neighbours. His brother was much older than him, but Jadran was too young to take care of himself. And I think that seeing all these patterns, designs and drawings has been quite important for him to have become an artist and work with drawing. He would see his mother working with these patterns and sometimes she made her own drawings. I think this was an important influence. Then there were the mines of the city. A big network of an underground system, which was a bit like an underworld. And many people died early in this town, Idrija, because of the mines. It was a very small town. A small place, but with a strange international history because the mercury was so important in the world. It was the biggest mercury mine, or the second biggest in the world. For example, Napoleon was there because of the mercury. And the reason why Pasolini lived there for a while is because his father had some job because of this international situation. Such a tiny place with such a small population. It was very compact. In the Julian Alps, in a valley with a river at the bottom and then mountains growing up around, a lot of nature, but also extremely civilised somehow. And under the whole town, a big network of mines and all the stories about people who died because of this and how the inhabitants perhaps were poisoned by the quicksilver that came into the water. This was, of course, the communist period with Tito. I think there were a lot of quite strong and special influences. This internationalism - even though it was pretty isolated, more or less in the countryside - was a paradox. Which I think was also the case with Jadran, again, he was a kind of paradox, as we also talked about concerning the personal and domestic versus the world. This is all mixing with each other and then becoming one, it's intertwined.

'I want to be' by Jadran Sturm & Åsa Lie, 1999
01:16:11 – 01:23:23

LB: You also said Idrija was interesting because it was very close to Italy, to Trieste, and that's where Jadran's mother used to sell the lace.

ÅL: Yes. They could take their car and go over - cross the border. Yugoslavia was a communist country, but it was much freer than other communist countries. It was actually kind of in between. It was not classic communist or capitalist. So they were allowed to go to Trieste for example. But somehow it was still "the east" and "the west". This installation has things in it from his whole life. Also from the time he lived with us, Merz and me. But he's not clearly referring to our existence. And that's not sad or anything, I'm just saying it's a fact. I think it's an interesting fact because I'm wondering a bit about that - why he has so much about his life in Yugoslavia and his childhood family, his background.

LB: Yes, it's completely about his own life.

AL: Exactly. The moment - the now of living there alone in his sickness, showing the needles and the different objects which had to do with illness. Yes. That combination, which is a big part of this installation. There are many intellectual references. Things that point to his knowledge and interests.

LB: And for how long do you think he worked on this?

ÅL: A few months. Yes. Some of the works existed before, but were put together in a different way and changed. And then it's how he made the installation. He added words and numbers. He had all these images and pieces since longer back in time, but in the way he put it together, each becomes a completely new piece and details are added. He scanned and printed old photos. These black and white paper prints were torn apart, and mixed with other images. You can see details from several different images. It's very free. Look at how intensive it is and how real it is. Extremely free. The way he built this installation and how the work is done. It's as if – I'm talking about what I think – he liberated himself somehow by making this. And it could also be a way of liberating himself from parts of his past.

'In the land of the wolf', a performance by Jadran Sturm at Espace0IN, 2018
01:27:12 – 01:35:40

MSL: Here's his father during WWII. The area where my father was born and grew up is very special because it has belonged to many different nations. When my father grew up it was part of Yugoslavia, but when his parents grew up it was part of Italy and when his grandparents grew up it was part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. So, apart from their own dialect, my great-grandfather's first language, the language he learned at school, was German, my grandparents first language was Italian and my father's first language was Slovenian. It's pretty interesting that for three generations, the nation and the language changed. Two of these generations were also involved in a world war. My great-grandfather fought for the Austrian-Hungarian Empire during WWI and my grandfather fought in Mussolini's army. It wasn't a choice, since every family had to send one son to fight. He fought in Sicily and when Italy capitulated he managed to make his way back to Idrija without getting caught, going through forests and abandoned roads. Back in Idrija he was fighting as a partisan against the Nazis. The Yugoslav Partisans were the most effective anti-Axis resistance movement. This is a photo of my father in the Yugoslavian army. All young men had to do military service. He was forced to join the Yugoslavian army and ended up in Macedonia for a few weeks, but he hated it. They eventually let him go home. He didn't do anything. A lot of people tried to act as if they were crazy to avoid the army, but he always told me the best way was not to act, but to just be yourself. If you don't like it, everyone will see that and they don't actually want someone in the army who doesn't do what they want, so they just said "go home". Hahaha LB: Nice strategy, passive anarchism.

'Yugoslavia' by CocoRosie, 2004
01:39:31 – 01:43:24

MSL: This could be 'fighter'^(fig.)?

LB: Or 'fair'?

MSL: He often wrote words the way they are pronounced, instead of how they're written.

LB: 'Fire'?

MSL: He didn't like to complicate languages, like the French who write letters that aren't pronounced. It's a typical upper class way of excluding people who aren't as educated, which is what they achieved with the French language. I used to be even more complicated. Jadran really hated this idea. Fuck that. It's like Jan Decorte, when he writes in Flemish, he writes the way we talk. That's also the idea my father had, we should write more as we talk.

LB: Words are recurring in both your practises, words such as money, gold, corruption, hierarchy, death, these are all big themes, that I have seen in the work of Jadran as well as in your work. Do you work with these words in order to figure out what they mean?

MSL: Yes, it is. It's the idea of these big words and the banality that they entail, what's hidden behind them, what you see and what you don't see, what's presented to you and what's secret, that's interesting for me.

LB: I think you have a specific vocabulary you share with Jadran.

MSL: Yes, there are these recurring themes, but there's also a difference when you look at the way my parents worked with these issues. There's a different way of handling them. I would say, there are similarities and differences. We always talked a lot about different topics and issues and were very close to each other, so in that sense you could say that we automatically share a part of the same language. As I said, there are similarities, but also differences.

LB: Can you point them out? Or maybe that's too difficult.

MSL: I think the way my parents worked together is very specific. The performances and videos they made were very direct and often political, pointing out issues, questioning things, a critique of society, a critique of the art world. The way I do it, isn't so direct, it's more subtle. LB: Do you think it's important to be more indirect about these topics?

MSL: I don't think it's important, it's just different ways of dealing with these topics, and probably it's also about being from different generations. When they grew up, you had the cold war, Baader Meinhof, their parents had been in WWII themselves, sexual freedom & liberation, all these issues that they grew up with. This kind of directness, you see that also when you look at films from that time, it was another kind of freedom, you could show things in films that you can't show today, it would never pass, but it did then. So, in a sense it's a different language, of a different time and of a different generation.

'Mrtva' by Mercedes & The Grind at Recyclart, 2019
01:50:37 – 01:58:37

This poster was published on occasion of the exhibition 'Did you kiss the spot to make it well'. A tribute to Jadran Sturm (1957-2019), showing his last works. Des Esseintes, Felix Sohiestraat 13, Hoeilaart (BE). From 19 Sept to 4 Oct 2020. Performances at the opening by Nick Defour, Waldo Pardon & Mercedes Sturm-Lie.

Courtesy of 'Jadran Sturm & Åsa Lie Private Stichting'. www.sturm-lie.be