

## ***ALTERED IMAGES: AN INTERVIEW WITH NICOLA BERGSTRÖM HANSEN***

BY JACQUELYN DAVIS

**Stockholm, Dec. 2011:** In the spring of 2011, I met Bergström Hansen for the first time. Upon viewing her work and discussing her approach, I commissioned her to contribute to a curatorial project called "The Paper Tape Series" which is a part of larger cross-cultural American-Scandinavian initiative called *valeveil*. We collaborated together to ascertain ways in which her artistic practice might speak to my own concerns regarding changing education policies in Sweden (and the European Union) which affect international students: with additional tuition fees and questionable application policies which I felt should not apply to art schools, believing that creativity is not correlated to citizenship, financial status or privilege but rather, more so, the reality of either having the opportunity to take advantage of specific resources or, in contrast, being excluded from them. She contributed to the "Unfinished Analogies" exhibition at Konsthall C's Centrifug space, and I viewed her recent work at *Renseriet* and *Under Bron* in Stockholm: two exhibitions simultaneously occurring. We plan to work together on a new cross-cultural project in 2012 that we will co-design and execute, as Swedish artist and American curator.



Nicola Bergström Hansen, *The Jonestown Library*, 2011, Installation; Courtesy of the artist

**Jacquelyn Davis:** *In a way, your work is oftentimes a faux-pas; it brings attention to historical events which many try to forget or erase, such as the school shooting in Columbine, Colorado, American criminality at its worst and the right-wing march organized by the Salem Foundation which draws attention to the death of a sixteen-year-old skinhead considered to be a martyr by white supremacist groups in Scandinavia. These historical tragedies and askew events are your current focus. How do you make your decisions as to which events deserve attention over others?*

**Nicola Bergström Hansen:** Things just haunt me—maybe all of us. I read something or I see an image and it sticks with me. I return to these specific kinds of events and stories over and over again, partly because society wants them erased and forgotten. It becomes an obsession—making sure that they cannot be erased or forgotten but instead must be examined and questioned. For me, it is also about “the outsider” and events and stories circulating around this concept / figure. I’m thinking about Bataille's heterology which concerns difference: how that which is different must be expelled in order for the same to remain the same. In many cases, this exclusion of the different (the outsider) also results in these very violent clashes. It concerns itself with sacrifice—on both parts.

**JD:** *You have an artistic background in photography, and your work is often image-heavy. Does photography as an art form influence your creative practice as it now stands, either directly or indirectly?*

**NBH:** When I started my bachelors at *The School of Photography* in Gothenburg, I bought a vintage limited edition Olympus 35 mm SLR camera—I think it was the snake-skin leatherette model. But I didn’t shoot even one roll of film with it. I decided that I wasn’t interested in being a photographer at all. I’m interested in images, but other peoples' images are even more appealing—especially media images. I spend hours and hours just looking at images. I collect them; I have a massive archive on my computer. This past summer, I worked as an editor for a newspaper. When I realized that I had access to the biggest image bank in Sweden, it was difficult for me to concentrate on my job. I instead wanted to download all of their images. There is some connection to photography as an art form in this behavior—this obsession with the image and archive. I would also say that discourses on photography and visual culture have been, and are, very influential to my practice.



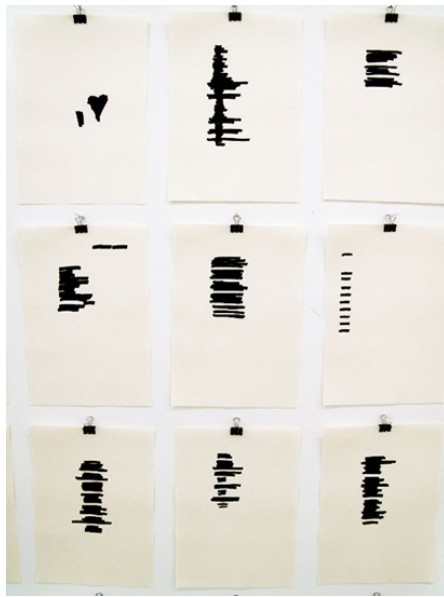
Nicola Bergström Hansen, *Tonårsdrömmar* (Teenage dreams), 2011, A4 poster collage 63 in x 90.6 in.; Courtesy of the artist.

**JD:** *Not all of your work is obviously political. Your latest piece *Tonårsdrömmar* / Teenage Dreams, 2011, for the exhibition "Åt helvete med alltihop / To Hell With It All" appears more rooted in the personal, being a series of poster collages linked to your teenage years: an assemblage of altered and unaltered images. Yet you admit that even while constructing this project, you were thinking of the song "I Don't Like Mondays" by The Boom Town Rats which is about a sixteen-year-old in San Diego who went on a shooting spree at an elementary school in 1979. These shooting sprees are anomalies and metaphor for the darker side of humanity. Can you explain your fixation with doom and senseless violence?*

**NBH:** This fixation with doom and violence, well, it's forbidden and it's definitive. It is that or those which breaks the rules, and there is no coming back from that. Maybe this is also what makes it both an enticing concept as well as a frightening one. In a postmodern society based on uncertainty and grey scales, doom and destruction is that imagined certainty. There is a need to witness. Just look at what's screened at theaters: from Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* to countless action flicks all set in a post-apocalyptic scenario. Look at the reactions that we have to disasters; we cannot look away. But it's interesting that you use the phrase "senseless violence," as if there is a kind of violence that ever makes sense.

**JD:** *Do you find yourself personally or emotionally affected by the tragedies that you focus on, or is your interest more from an academic / research-oriented perspective? Perhaps, your personal connection to an event changes as you gather more research?*

**NBH:** I always feel emotionally affected, but the more research that I do into a subject / event, the easier it gets to look past that and focus on the work itself—to not get caught up in emotions. Practicing art can be an ongoing form of self-therapy, but for me that isn't the goal. Instead, I want to broaden the scope and look at how we, as a society, relate to and form an understanding of these specific events.



Nicola Bergström Hansen, *77 Possible Explanations (censored)*, 2009, 77 A4 papers, bulldog clips; Courtesy of the artist.

**JD:** *Do you take the artistic responsibility or role of rewriting or editing history through your examination and expression of various tragedies, or is your work not consciously attempting to do this?*

**NBH:** Not re-writing. More like questioning what is really there and creating new connections.

**JD:** *When you have a question about an important historical event which is not clearly answered during your research process, how does this make you feel? What do you do, as an artist, to overcome any feeling that your process may be flawed or lacking (if this is ever how you feel, of course)?*

**NBH:** If research answered all of my questions, I would lose interest. For me, art is the reaction to not finding the answers. Art becomes the only way to continue research.

**JD:** *In Rogues, 2010, you collected images of bank robbers from websites archiving surveillance shots—in part, to assist in the process of identifying criminals. But you found this to be an impossible idea, since these images were low quality and faces were often masked. Therefore, you gave these images a new function since most of them did not serve their initial purpose. It is this transformative aspect in your work which is attractive. You re-contextualize materials which simultaneously serve another purpose and are widely accepted by most. In a way, your process is rogue-like; your choices magnify a creative terrain outside the norm, an anomalistic sphere of curiosity. You mention your fascination with an image which captures a decisive moment, yet your art often demystifies and breaks down this moment. Or would you say that your art as it stands now aims for something else?*

**NBH:** No, I think that you are spot on.



Nicola Bergström Hansen, *Alla till Salem! (Everyone to Salem!)*, 2011, Lambda prints mounted on aluminum, 47.2 in x 31.5 in.; Courtesy of the artist.

**JD:** *Alla Till Salem / Everyone to Salem, 2011* is one of your projects focusing on the right-wing march in Salem, otherwise known as *Salemarschen*. You were invited to respond to the theme of "pilgrimages" and created a series of digital collages appropriated directly from the march and further manipulated. This politico-historical event is charged, but you still chose to focus on this event as a starting point. Do you run into complications regarding such subject matter? Do others ever warn you to steer clear of such topics? I'm thinking, more specifically, of teachers or those in positions of authority? If so, how do you respond?

NBH: I would say that if someone warns you to steer clear of a subject, then you're doing something right and should continue. There shouldn't be any subjects that are forbidden or off limits for an artist. It is important to remember that this kind of thinking was the driving force both for the neo-Nazis who destroyed the Andres Serrano exhibition "A History of Sex" in Lund (2007) and the former director of the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Mats Widbom, who tried to persuade the artist Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin to censor her own work in the exhibition "Jerusalem." Maybe Mats Widbom's attempt to censor the exhibition sprung from a fear of instigating a potentially violent reaction from the public in response to the exhibition. Maybe, Widbom believed that he did what he did for safety reasons. But what he didn't understand was that by censoring, he was acting in the same way as the neo-Nazis—but in a more subtle and sneaky, bureaucratic way. Both Mats Widbom's and the neo-Nazis' attempts to silence artists are equally harmful.



Nicola Bergström Hansen, *77 Possible Explanations (Censored)*, 2009, 77 A4 papers, bulldog clips; Courtesy of the artist.

**JD:** *The previous question leads me to other forms of censorship from higher authorities. In your work titled 77 Possible Explanations (Censored), 2009, which are seventy-seven A4 prints, it exposes censored material from the Columbine shooting, drawing attention to the phenomenon. These documents were censored by the American police before becoming*

*available for the public, and this fact is highlighted in your work. You expose that which is hidden to the public by marking out everything but that which was initially censored. Viewing these documents side by side, I cannot help but think of the famed Rorschach tests which are used to observe peoples' personality traits and emotional intelligence—for both the "normal" and disturbed. Do you believe that by exposing that which is censored, we are more apt to understand ourselves (similar to the inkblot technique)? What were your intentions with this reversal project?*

**NBH:** *77 Possible Explanations (Censored)* is, in a way, a manifestation of my own frustration over the fact that there were so many questions left unanswered regarding the shooting in Columbine. There was such a strong need from us, the public, to understand and to be able to fill in the gaps after the tragedy. In this case, the censoring became a playground for fantasies, and like you pointed out, almost like a Rorschach test. But what is being censored? Is the answer I'm looking for really underneath the black ink? For me, it was almost like a game—trying to figure out what was underneath. In some places, the way in which the censoring is done gives hints of there being lists (of the soon-to-become victims?), but in other places, the censoring has taken on the shape of a small heart.

**JD:** *In Say Hello, Wave Goodbye, 2009, the shooters from the Finnish shootings in Jokela and Kauhajoki together with one of the shooters in Columbine (Dylan Klebold) are shown waving in a three-video installation meant to be simultaneously viewed. Watching these shooters wave at you, their seemingly harmless faces exposed, looking directly into the camera, it evokes an emotional response—eerie yet sublime. One confronts these shooters in an indirect manner, and the line between the victim and perpetrator becomes a fine one. Do you ever find yourself to be a sympathizer when discovering more about such figures? Does your perspective of these killers change with new information obtained?*

**NBH:** There is a fine line between victim and perpetrator because we are all human and all sometimes victims—something that holds especially true in these events. One must not forget that there weren't twelve students who lost their lives in the Columbine school shooting (as Wikipedia says) but, rather fourteen students. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold also died at Columbine High. But back to your question: with the more that you find out, the more information that you have, it becomes more difficult to distance yourself. I'm thinking of the image of Saddam Hussein taken right after he was captured. He was an old man, with fear in his eyes, clothes soiled. In the end, we are all human. It's never black and white. It's never monster or man.

**JD:** *What other skills or approaches towards your practice are you cultivating?*

**NBH:** Right now, I'm trying to come up with a way to continuously download all of the images posted on the image board *4-chan*—especially the */b/* channel. I'm terrified of what will happen if I succeed in my quest.

**JD:** *Explain your process of gathering information and research related to your projects. What do you do when you are not in your studio which helps you examine and, ideally, reach goals?*

**NBH:** I have a studio, but I almost never use it. Most of the time during research, I only need a computer and an Internet connection. I mainly work from home. During my initial research into a new project, I spend almost all of my waking hours on the Internet. Traces of the kinds of stories and events that I want to examine are primarily found there. When I feel that I have collected enough material, I try to leave my computer, go to the library or art shows, read books, talk to people. In the beginning of the process, I take everything in—as much as possible—but after a while, I am filled with this information, and something needs to come out.

*ArtSlant would like to thank Nicola Bergström Hansen for her assistance in making this interview possible.*

--Jacquelyn Davis