

Orgies of Modernization:

NORDSTRÖM'S EXEMPLARY WORLD

Jockum Nordström's drawings and collages are usually understood to combine an implausible range of influences (folk and outsider art, surrealism, art brut, modernist architecture, children's book illustration) into a highly personal fantasy world. Part of Nordström's success—though arguably not the most compelling way to frame his importance—might be accounted for by the increasing centrality of the concept of the personal world. Fabricated often out of heterogeneous cultural materials, "worlds" have become successful endpoints of MFA programs and thus beginnings of careers. Understood in this way, worlds are a kind of harmless private commodity that can be fabricated spontaneously in infinite proliferation—the only raw materials necessary being the good old psyche and a sharp thrift store taste for deals in underused art historical periods and styles. These two raw materials then come together into a neat economy, since it is the function of the personal world to preserve and mildly entertain the alienated creator during the picturesque psychological storms and fits of ennui that authenticate him as an artist.

LYTLE SHAW'S books of poetry include *Cable Factory 20* (Atelos, 1999) and *The Lobe* (Roof, 2002). His forthcoming *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* will be published by Iowa Press. Shaw is Assistant Professor of English at NYU and curator of the Line Reading Series at The Drawing Center.

LYTLE SHAW

Nordström's reception thus far has mostly involved this kind of reading, as for instance when Mårten Castenfors describes Nordström's "world full of daydreams, keeping the demons at bay."¹

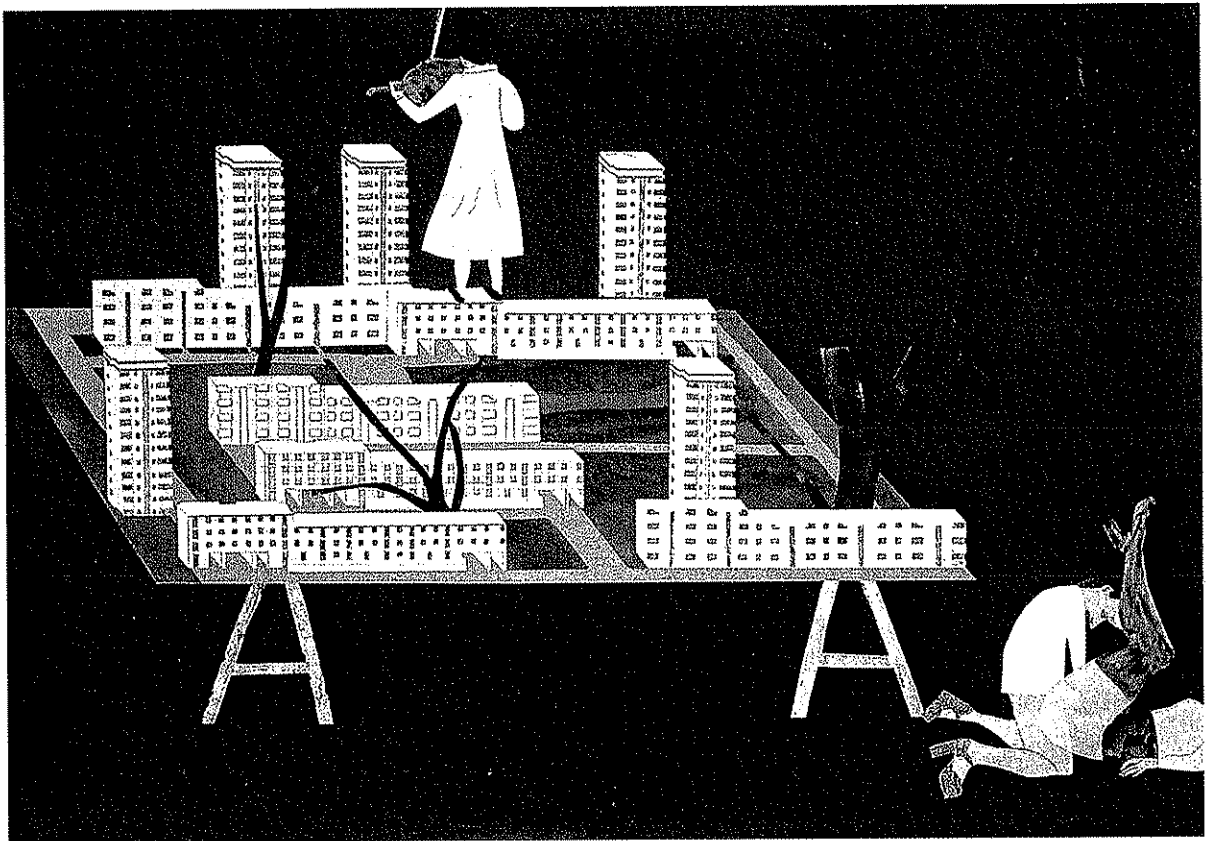
But despite their nineteenth-century dandy top hats or sixties leisure slacks, Nordström's demons are not purely daydreams. Though his world (like any world worth taking seriously) contains elements of fantasy deployed with playfulness and ambiguity, understanding this world entirely within the category of the personal quarantines its references and conventions, cutting them off from their substantive interactions with the history of culture. Consider *DOWN IN THE LION'S DEN* (2002). Like many of Nordström's drawings, this piece employs a split composition familiar to architectural renderings, in which macro views of the context of a project (in this case sixties-style, modern, two-story and three-story houses with sloping roofs and skylights) are coupled with an interior picture of what might occur inside a particular room. Here a recreation room (pool table in its center) contains various cut-out collage figures partly disrobed and uncoupled from the sex acts into

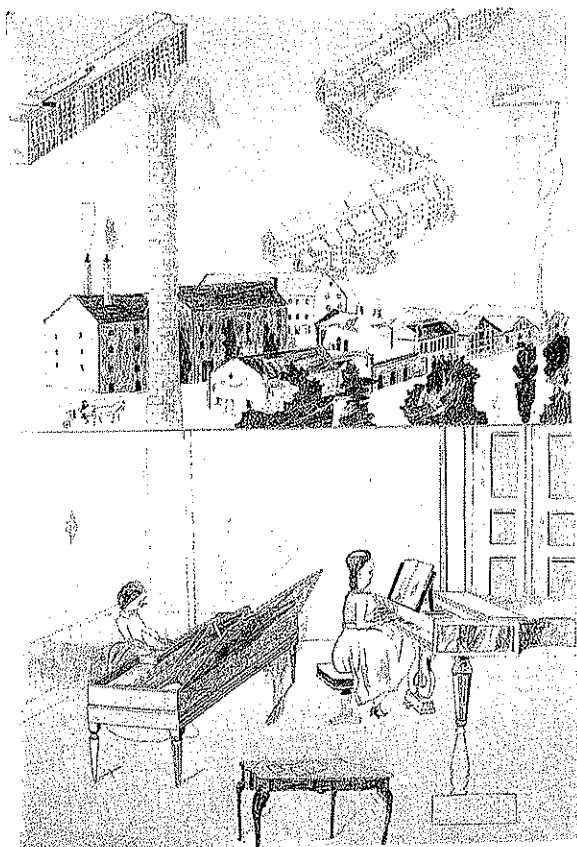
JOCKUM NORDSTRÖM, *THE ARCHITECTS*, 2001, mixed media and collage, 19 3/4 x 27 1/2" / *DIE ARCHITEXTEN*, verschiedene Materialien und Collage, 50,2 x 69,9 cm.
(ALL PHOTOS: DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK AND MAGNUS KARLSSON, STOCKHOLM)

which they would appear seamlessly to fit, as well as several dandies awkwardly arranged around the table. The same convention is at work in *THEIR VERY OWN AND GOLDEN CITY* (2002) where, below a gray field of modernist apartment blocks, the exemplary space now becomes a den with a topless, stockinged woman hovering horizontally above a modish man in a ruffled shirt on a couch, while nearby on the floor a boy plays with a large model of an apartment building. Though obviously playful and extreme, these drawings operate in the way that all architectural renderings do in suggesting the pleasures available within newly designed worlds. By treating his figures, too, as cut-outs that clearly fit into other contexts (the same pantless, kneeling humper from the pool room, for instance, appears in *THE ARCHITECT*, 2001, now joined to a woman below a model of a *Siedlung* or modernist village), he extends this exemplarity to the human subjects that inhabit his

interiors. That Nordström appropriates these architectural conventions of exemplarity—shifted from the elegant, suited strollers or view-appreciators of the classic renderings to his own awkward orgy-goers and hipster musicians—is one of the crucial components of his world.

Given this, we might pay particular attention to the reappearance of architectural icons—from Mies van der Rohe's Dessau Bauhaus (the most common icon), to various Le Corbusier buildings, to more generic modernist apartment projects. These images, we must remember, were not just instances of, but also polemics for, the revolutionary potential of modernist architecture—its purported ability to reshape the world, and thus the social order, from the ground up. Such a world is coming off the drawing boards of Nordström's *THE DRAWING OFFICE* (2001), where the eager draftsmen in the studio look out the window to the kinds of buildings they seem to





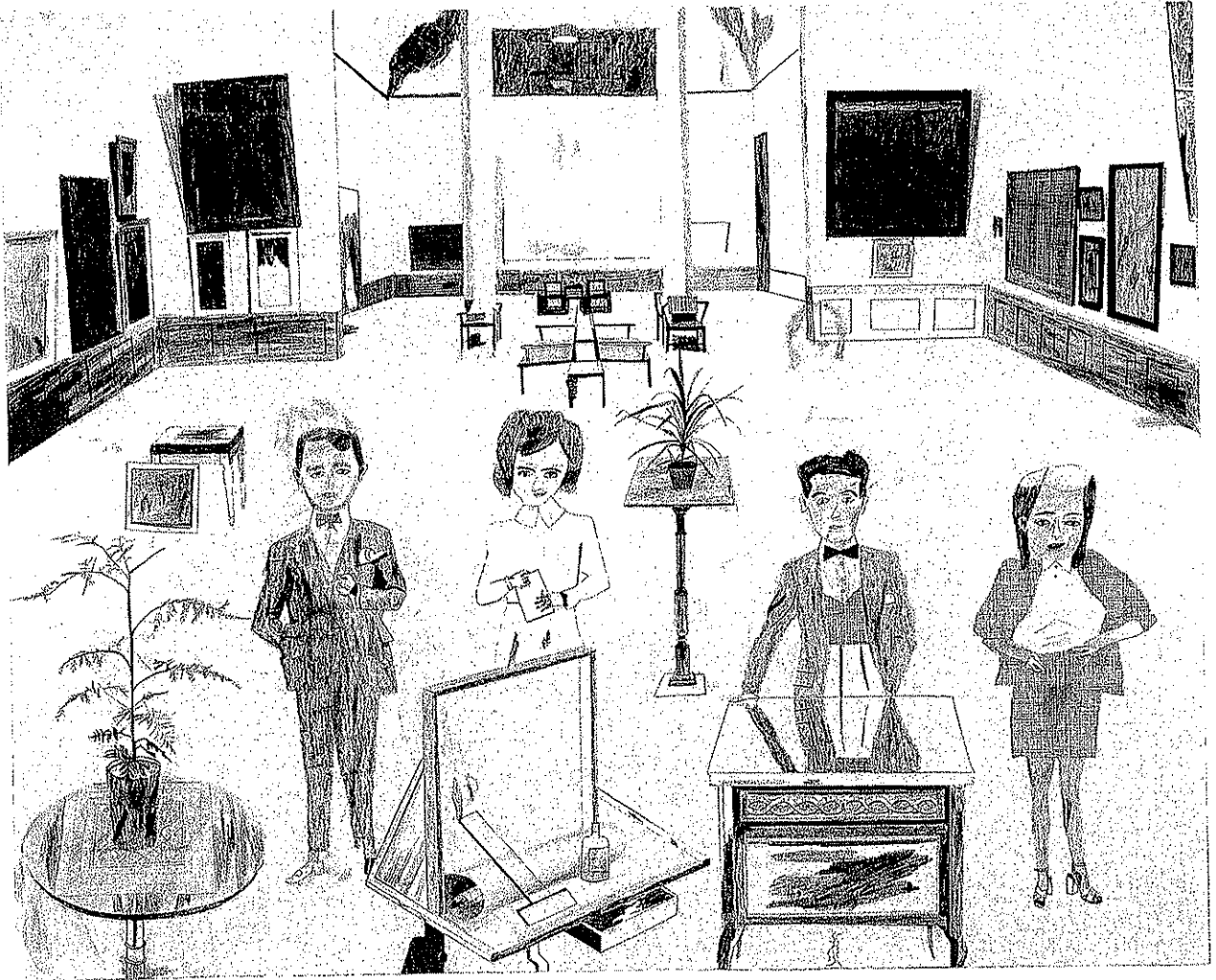
JOCKUM NORDSTRÖM, *THE PIANO FACTORY*, 2002, diptych,
 graphite on paper, 23 1/2 x 15 3/4" / *DIE KLAVIERFABRIK*,
 Diptychon, Graphit auf Papier, 59,7 x 40 cm.

be designing, perspective renderings of Mies and Corbusier buildings on their foregrounded drafting boards.

What difference then does it make, we might ask, that Nordström is Scandinavian (he lives in Stockholm), which may be the one small section of the globe where, as the twentieth century proceeded, modernism's promise did not simply become a parody of itself, and where a version of modernism in its

socialist guise still provides much of the infrastructure for the built and lived-in world? Do we turn him into a quaint, regional allegorist—a kind of updated Nils Nilsson Skum (one of Nordström's favorite artists, whose herds of reindeer throb through bleak Lapland valleys)—if we see Nordström's "world of daydreams" in some kind of dialogue with the basic promises of modernism as filtered through Scandinavia? Perhaps this association would please Nordström. Though variously engrossed, his musicians, copulators, bird-watchers, and dancers do seem part of a larger attempt to design a world of pleasure and leisure from the ground up.

This brings us again to his characters: why, if we want to entertain the above possibility, are so many dressed in nineteenth-century garb? There is obviously an element of self-conscious anachronism or carefully calculated awkwardness to Nordström's work. And yet this may not be unrelated to the concerns of the collages. Take *THE PIANO FACTORY* (2002). Like those collages, this drawing, too, gives us a wide view of a town (nineteenth-century row houses, warehouses, and factories) with an interior below—a domestic scene of two women in long dresses playing pianos. Not only is the town undergoing industrialization (smokestacks figure prominently and the housing is crunched together), but the warehouses also may be morphing into modernist apartment blocks: clearly this form of insulated leisure will not last. The guidelines of the central chimney extend into the living room, where the intent piano playing operates as a kind of embattled privacy. This is a scene of transformation, of modernization, as is *ABIDE WITH ME (THE FURNITURE FACTORY)* (2000), where the new housing has definitely broken through into the nineteenth-century town, the children have started to smoke, and the old hand-crafted furniture cannot be long for this world. The modernist buildings on the drafting boards and displayed in the living rooms as exemplary models elsewhere in Nordström's work seem to solicit the consent of precisely these piano players, top-hatted nature lovers, equestrians, and buggy riders. These are the subjects who must be won over, whose desires must be captured by the new ways of arraying a built world.



JOCKUM NORDSTRÖM, BACK TO WORK, 2003, graphite on paper, 22 x 27 1/8" / ZURÜCK ZUR ARBEIT, Graphit auf Papier, 56 x 69 cm.



JOCKUM NORDSTRÖM, THE BACHELOR'S ARGUMENTS, 2003, diptych, mixed media on paper, 44 1/2 x 59 1/4" /
DIE THESEN DES JUNGGESELLEN, verschiedene Materialien auf Papier, 113 x 150,5 cm.

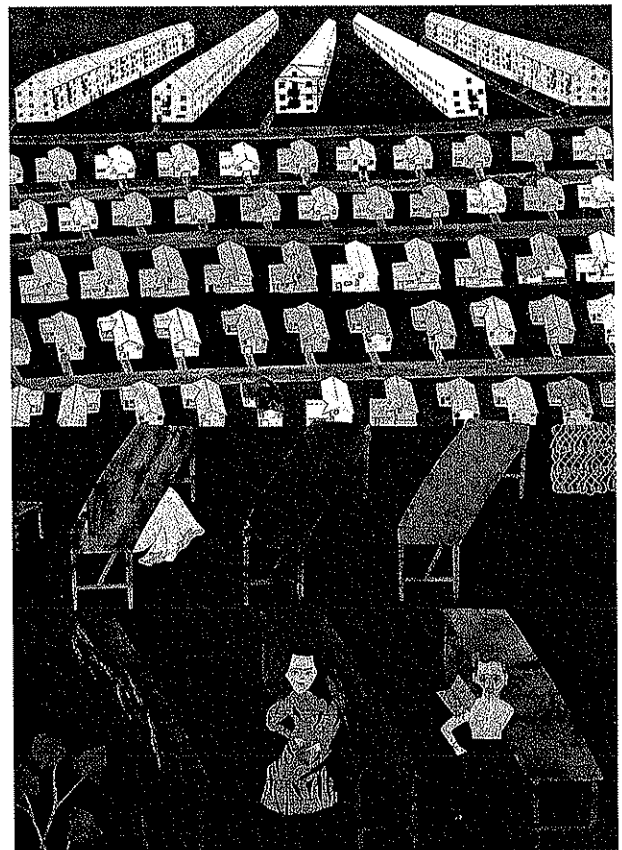
At the same time, Nordström's own drawing technique holds out against standardization; it is as if each object within the drawing suggests its own treatment. In his interiors especially, we see ghosted and erased forms, varying line weights and textures, smudges, revisions, and wonderful shifts between sharp focus, surprising detail, and looser, cartoony, sometimes child-like indications. Birds loom to the front of his pastoral compositions, impossibly huge—as though a fantasy gratification of our desire, when on nature walks, were to appropriate and apprehend nature. In his nautical drawings, waves are often indicated by swirling parallel lines that “float” on top of the sea's surface—as oversized fish fly out of the waves and up against the rocky coasts. Though both of these genres (like his equestrian drawings) may seem to bear a less direct relationship to modernization (and they tend not to use the bi-partite or tri-partite architectural compositions), we might still see them as implicitly linked to the larger world of these other works. As instances of its promised leisure, they are no longer contained within rooms but let loose in the landscape. Like the nineteenth-century town drawings, however, many of these seem to explore vanishing and outmoded forms of leisure—the world that will be replaced if the drafting boards have their way.

What is interestingly outmoded about these drawings, though, is not just their subject matter but also their method. Given Nordström's refusal to standardize representational conventions, given the way his objects seem to generate their own treatment, we might say that these drawings are also about the vast amounts of time, energy, and freedom required to make them—about the artist being able to decide to move a flying fish and a frigate from above a steamship, or shift a piano's profile in a staid living room.

One might wonder what motivates Nordström's move away from drawing toward the more standardized, possibly less time-consuming, process of collage. While an awareness of time might seem to generate his re-deployable and humorous cut-out figures, ultimately Nordström works against the logic of efficiency. He forms his collage backgrounds from tiny strips of various papers, as though in imitation of shaker drawings or quilts. In FOLK-DANCE (2002), he

extends his interiors into sustaining hallucinatory landscapes that collapse the distinction between inside and outside—it seems as though the mod band in this collage, simply through its music, could call such atmospheres into being. Nordström's world, as a whole, evokes the efficient and streamlined moment of early modernism only to propose a deeper, more anarchistic world of pleasures in and between its spaces.

1) “Jockum Nordström—A Sensualist in the Making” in: *Jockum Nordström: Between the Table and the Legs* (Stockholm: Karlsson/Zwirner, 2003), p. 6.



JOCKUM NORDSTRÖM, *THE READERS*, 2003, mixed media on paper, 39 x 27 1/2" / *DIE LESER*, verschiedene Materialien auf Papier, 99 x 70 cm.