

Not-so-safe Europeans: Interrogating Identities and Photographic Conventions in Pelle Kronestedt’s *Safe European*

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This paper addresses the intersection of European photography and European identity through a discussion of *Safe European*, a photographic project on identity and youth unemployment by Swedish photographer Pelle Kronestedt. In an analysis informed by semiotics and work on the political rhetoric of photography, the author argues that, through display in an unusual exhibition locale and an unexpected focus for a documentary photographic project on such a subject, *Safe European* subverts expectations and raises questions about photographic representation and cultural attitudes.

Introduction

Late one night towards the end of summer of 2000, the advertising billboards in 12 subway stations in central Stockholm were exchanged.¹ This was nothing unusual; the process takes place regularly and at night when trains run less frequently, allowing workers to stand on the tracks while gluing and brushing sheets of ad messages, like wallpaper, onto large boards on the tiled walls. This time, though, the new faces did not belong to flawless, slim models or to the rich and famous.

There was a fascinating, liminal moment when the old advertising messages cohabited with new faces within the same frames.² For instance, at the centrally located subway stop Slussen, the likeness of pop star Carola, who is on a first-name basis with the entire Swedish population and a perennial subject of the tabloids, momentarily appeared next to a new image of an unknown, middle-aged woman whose outsized, lined face was pasted onto two billboards, a contrast to Carola's smiling perfection.

During the next few weeks, advertising messages selling beer, lottery tickets, the latest cell phone model and vacation trips were interspersed with photographs like those of an unknown family seated in their sparsely furnished, gritty living room staring at a television screen, next to a close-up photograph of a cup filled with over-sized egg yolks, and another image of a young woman wearing a red, sleeve-less dress and leaning against a red wall. An excerpt from a first-person narrative next to these photographs explained that her name was Claire, and that she was 16 and lived with her family in Dublin.

The new billboard-size images – a total of 240 – were from Swedish photographer Pelle Kronestedt's *Safe European*, a book and exhibition project focusing on unemployment in the European Union (Kronestedt 2000).

This paper, presented on an INTER conference panel devoted to European photography, reads Kronestedt's project in the context of the thematic questions posed by panel organizer Álvaro Pina: *Who is a "European? What is the relationship between photography and reality? What is the state of European photographic practice?* I want to suggest that *Safe European* is an example of an intimate and collaborative photographic practice. Furthermore, through subversion of expectations, the project poignantly raises questions about representation and consumerism, and about attitudes towards the subject for Kronestedt's project: the relationship between unemployment and identity.

Safe European has been exhibited in over 30 locations and in different versions and formats, in Sweden, elsewhere in Europe, Asia and Canada; this paper focuses solely on the Stockholm subway exhibition and on the book, which was published in 2000 in Sweden.³

Prior to Kronestedt, other photographers have addressed European identity or the state of Europe in periods of crisis or change. Arguably the most well known predecessor is Henri Cartier-Bresson (1998), whose travels throughout the entire continent resulted in *Europeans*. By bringing together disparate places photographed between the wars and after World War Two, and by naming the inhabitants "Europeans," the project emphasized unity, a shared destiny and the need for reconciliation after the War. In addition, Carl de Keyzer (2000) recently published a book, *Evropa*, on the territories of the former Habsburg Empire. Focusing on the 500-year anniversary celebrations of the birth of Emperor Charles V, de Keyzer raises questions about the meaning of history through ironic visual juxtapositions between the sacred and

1 The exhibition was on display in the Stockholm subway between July 31 and August 20, 2000.

2 This moment is captured in photographs documenting the mounting of the exhibition. The images are reproduced in a folder accompanying the book *Safe European*.

3 *Safe European* was produced by Arbetets Museum in Norrköping, Riksställningar and *Safe European*. It was funded by the leading trade union in Sweden Landsorganisationsen i Sverige, by CNA, EU Culture 2000, and the Swedish trade union publication *Dagens Arbete*. Source: folder in the book *Safe European*.

the profane, and between reenactments clashing with commercial appropriation and apparent disinterest in the past.

While Cartier-Bresson was concerned with the post-war reconstruction of Europe and de Keyzer with representations of history, Kronestedt's rhetorical question and point of departure, printed in the book, is: "If you lose your job, do you also lose your identity?" (Kronestedt 2000, p. 4). His stated inspiration for *Safe European* were the chronic state of unemployment in the era of globalization, as well as the song "Safe European Home" by the British punk group The Clash:

Increased productivity no longer means employing more people...And lack of jobs for all is an accepted fact...More and more people in the West have never had a job, so we need to change our way of looking at being out of work...Safe European is about Western Europe's new culture of unemployment---20 million, in 1998 (p. 6).

Drawing on those depressing statistics in the Eurostat database, Kronestedt randomly selected one unemployed person in each of the 15 European Union member countries in 1998; each person had been categorized as "typical" or "statistically representative" of the unemployed in his or her country (p. 6). Thirteen of the participants were under 20 – reflecting the large unemployment rate among young people within the E.U., and 12 were women, who also have a high rate of unemployment (p. 263). Swedish ethnologist Lars-Göran Strömbom interviewed each participant and wrote the first-person narratives published in the back of the book; excerpts from the interviews also have been included in the exhibition contexts.

The Europeans, According to *Safe European*

Contrary to classical social documentaries focusing on the plight of the unemployed, such as the Farm Security Administration, the photographs of *Safe European* do not show the participants standing in line at the employment office.⁴ Neither are they portrayed seated by the kitchen table pouring over wanted ads. In fact, the images overwhelmingly show leisure – after all leisure time is something they have in abundance – hanging out with friends, eating, or smoking.

Indeed, without reading the interviews or looking more closely at the excerpts accompanying the exhibit, one might not guess the subjects were unemployed. This ambiguity is the result of the photographer's stated ambition to portray the participants' lives, not only their plight as unemployed citizens (Kronestedt 2007. pers. comm., 30 May).

Interestingly, this ambiguity is reflected in some divergent interpretations among reviewers. One Swedish journalist criticized the project's tenuous link to unemployment (Borger-Bendegard 2000), while another critic interpreted the sometimes distant, evasive postures of the participants as appropriate due to the difficulty of capturing the nature of unemployment (Stahre 2000).

Kronestedt's departure from a familiar social documentary trope is in my view akin to that theorized by Michael Shapiro who, in a project on the political rhetoric of photography,

4 The Farm Security Administration (FSA), arguably the most well-known and one of the major publicly funded documentary projects, existed between 1935-1943, first as part of the Resettlement Administration. Under the leadership of Roy Stryker, a number of famous photographers made their name as image-makers for the federal government in the United States, among those: Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Jack Delano and Ben Shahn. The image-makers were sent on assignment to cover topics such as the plight of migrants and farmers, for the purpose of documenting and creating support for government programs of the New Deal. However, many of the images as well as series of photographs, have become iconic and, frequently, are seen as signature examples of social documentary, perhaps most notably Lange's portraits of a migrant mother and Evans' portraits of a family of poor farmers in Alabama. See Fleischhauer and Brannan for a history of the FSA and excellent reproductions of 15 photographic essays.

examines photographic portraiture that, in his view, breaks with the "implicit epistemological code hovering around a photograph" (Shapiro 1988, p. 124). According to Shapiro, photographs that "arrest the subconscious process by which we assimilate the copy to the real" (p. 124) might do so through the subversion of point of view, or, such as in the American West portraits by Richard Avedon by subverting the expectations of scenic vistas by instead portraying working-class inhabitants and native Americans. According to Shapiro, "the disruptive power of his human figures takes place in the context of an interpretive tradition to which photography has contributed, one which has depopulated the West and thus deproblematized the West's human situation" (p. 158). I read Kronestedt's photographs in a similar way, because he opts not to portray the participants as victims or as marginalized, a move challenging viewers to question attitudes towards unemployment and people who are unemployed.

In his analysis of Avedon's project as a disruption of the myth of the American West in photographic and painterly representations, Shapiro emphasizes the ways in which Avedon – while stressing his persona as a famous photographer better known for his glamorous fashion shots – populates the landscape with unsung heroes instead of famous or mythical cowboys. Similarly, the Europeans, according to Kronestedt, are neither the Eurocrats, nor are they the corporate leaders or young university students participating in study-abroad opportunities.

Furthermore, Kronestedt refrains from searching for and highlighting national characteristics and differences; in contrast, through their activities and through the photographer's focus on similar activities and sites, there is a sense of unity or shared experience or through membership in what might be a trans-national unemployment culture or youth culture (with the exception of one participant, who is in her fifties). By inference, the problems facing those without jobs are the same in all the E.U. countries.

A second stated reason for the personal focus of the photographs is the collaboration between Kronestedt and the participants. As preparation, Kronestedt asked each person to think of favorite places and objects, many of which are included in the visual essays (Kronestedt 2007 in pers. comm., 30 May). The result is an intimate portraiture with autobiographical elements suggesting, in response to the photographer's posed question, that identity does *not* emanate from professional status. Instead, it derives from emotional connections and family, and, judging from these photographs, it appears to come from consumption.

In the context of the Stockholm subway exhibition, this intimacy reduces the distance between participants and viewers of the images. Apparently, judging from the photographs, unemployed Europeans – disregarding their nationalities – are just like any Stockholm commuter. In fact, the site for the exhibition – a place where inhabitants engage in the everyday practice of commuting – heightens the tension in the message: that the photographs portray people who do *not* commute since they do not have a job. Indeed, according to one Swedish reviewer, Stahre, this exhibition jolts commuters "out of silent collectiveness, to see the individual".⁵ Here, the word "collective" is used as an equivalent of anonymous, as in the practice of commuting where travelers are close together yet isolated from others.

On the Relationship Between Photography and Reality

As a subway commuter viewing *Safe European*, I experienced a tension between identification and alienation, between recognition of familiar visual signs in advertising messages and uncertainty about the new images from *Safe European* which sometimes replaced commercial speech and other time were placed next to it. This ambiguity brings to mind Roland Barthes' (1973) now-famous semiotic analysis of an advertisement selling Italian pasta and other food products. Barthes argues that photograph and text in this advert draw on and use bourgeois aesthetic conventions and cultural stereotypes to create what he calls "Italianicity,"

5 Translation from the Swedish is by the author.

that is, the essence of Italy (pp. 33-35). The notion of Italianicity, in turn, draws on desire and a longing the ad promises to fulfill for those initiated.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the subway exhibition, in my experience, is the frustration of that desire. This is achieved in part through the juxtaposition of advertising messages which seek to fulfill a desire, and the documentary images which, in their monumental, unvarnished, in-your-face portraits of daily life – through a different aesthetics, such as the use of collage, and frequently mounted as diptychs or triptychs – interrupt the interpretation of said advertising messages. In part, the subversion occurs through the ordinariness of the *Safe European* environment that could be anyone's home or family; in essence not the dreams created by advertising.

Interestingly, this disruption is double in the sense that, although several of the individuals in Kronestedt's photographs actually do consume such articles as beer or cigarettes, the sites where this consumption takes place are mundane. This may result in a negation of the surrounding "authentic" advertising messages that are more familiar, or one might even be disturbed by the scenes presented by Kronestedt because they do not fit into expectations of visual messages in spaces normally devoted to commercial speech.

Conclusions: On Safe European and European Photographic Practice

Safe European is clearly a collaborative project where participants were invited to control where, with whom and how they were to be photographed. As such, it is in tune with a current – yet hardly new – subjective turn in photography where the photographer refrains from claiming to "tell the truth." Explaining his view on photographic practice and his aim for this project, Kronestedt states:

The investigation is a visual study – a subjective document of our times revealing personal fates otherwise hidden by statistics. The style is documentary. For a photographer context is always arranged, not least because of the fact of the camera (2000, p. 6).

Furthermore, the inclusion of first-person accounts based on interviews lets participants speak in their own voices and, especially in the book format, gives biographical and cultural context to the visual essays.

The Stockholm subway exhibition, specifically, is one among many recent public art projects displayed or performed in sites other than museums or galleries. It should be noted that the Stockholm subway system is in fact the site of several permanent art displays; however those pieces are as a rule separate from advertising messages. Furthermore, in 1998, advertising billboards in the subway were used for display of photographic art during the *Under/Exposed* group exhibition.⁶ In fact, Kronestedt (2007, pers. comm., 30 May) explains that he was inspired by the *Under/Exposed* project in the choice of the subway as exhibition venue.

Yet *Safe European* differs from *Under/Exposed* in that the former is an intervention with one message and about one topic, not the work of several artists. Another difference is that the *Safe European* images literally and symbolically co-habit with the advertising messages without a clear border. In addition, the project encroaches on commercial speech and mimics it; advertising billboard space was in fact purchased for the exhibition images. As previously noted, *Safe European* also draws on advertising style in size (oversize), placement and materiality (posters), yet the documentary style and aesthetic as well as the content clash with the

6 *Under/Exposed* was one of the cultural events during the year-long celebration, in 1998, of Stockholm as cultural capital of Europe. The exhibition included 635 images by more than 200 international photographers. As in *Safe European*, the images in *Under/Exposed* were digital inkjet prints mounted on advertising billboards in a number of subway stations.

surrounding commercial messages. This in turn raises questions about the commercial speech dominating the public room as the new photographs become integrated into everyday practices, such as commuting. Ultimately, I read the exhibition as an intervention challenging notions and stereotypes in visual messages and attitudes about unemployment.

Kronstedt (pers. comm., 30 May) refers to the project and, especially, the subway exhibition as propaganda, explaining that his intentions were to get exposure and contribute to the debate about unemployment. In the subway setting alone, the project was widely viewed – given the hundreds of thousands of commuters who pass the centrally located stations daily – and the book as well as the various exhibitions were covered by national and regional dailies and weeklies in Sweden. The press coverage analyzed for this paper comments equally on the aesthetic merits of the work and on unemployment as a social problem and cultural phenomenon.⁷ Interestingly, some journalists also interpreted the project as a critique of the values of our work-fixated culture, which is: "a world where we still equate a professional title with personality" (Björkqvist 1999), and "the pointless hunt for a life without time" (Stahre 2000).⁸

Part of the project's appeal is no doubt the intimate, personal focus in visual studies and texts emphasizing personal experiences of a structural problem frequently reduced to statistics. *Safe European* gives visibility to citizens who otherwise might be marginalized or absent from optimistic narratives of European integration as linked to economic progress.

On social and cultural levels, it is an uncomfortable notion for the European Union that a young generation gets accustomed to being unemployed and, perhaps, that they do not mind or expect to ever become employed. However, what is unmistakable is that, although individuals might be taken care of financially – either by family or by society—according to *Safe European* it is not a life of luxury to be unemployed. The interviews give a stronger sense than the photographs of the worry for the future and sense of alienation many of the participants express.⁹

Would a portrait of unemployment in the E.U. ten years later be similar or different? Kronstedt (2007, pers. comm., 30 May) explains that he plans a follow-up study in 2008 with the same participants. This time, he plans to use photography and video to portray how the 15 have fared in the era of further European expansion and globalization. The participants may not have lost their identity, but the question is, as the truncated and ambiguous title *Safe European* suggests: are they really safe?

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7 See Björkqvist, Borger-Bendegard, de Cienfuegos, Dandanelle, Hedlund, Sandgren, Stahre and Thunberg.

8 Translations from the Swedish are by the author.

9 There are, however, notable individual differences, which may be the result of each participant's economic and social circumstance and responsibilities. For instance, Eva, 19, in Rome, is a single mother living with her own parents who feels pressured to get a job and worries about the future (see Kronstedt 2000, p. 256). Micke, 21, in Stockholm, meanwhile, does not appear to worry; he talks about his yearning for freedom and says he deliberately only works as much as he has to in order to get benefits (see p. 261). These contrasting views may also reflect differences in unemployment benefit accessibility and amount in the 15 E.U. countries.

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