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FOUNTAINS FAILURES FUTURES: THE AFTERLIVES OF PUBLIC ART

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In 2020, a national call for a Designed Living Environment / Gestaltad livsmiljö was made through a unique collaboration between Formas (a Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development), Boverket (Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning), Riksantikvarieämbetet (Swedish National Heritage Board), ArkDes (Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design), and Statens konstråd (Public Art Agency Sweden). The aim of the call was to highlight aesthetic perspectives and the role of public art in sustainable public architecture and design.

Ten interdisciplinary research projects on the role of public art were each awarded a four-year research grant. The Fountain: An art-technological-social drama is one of those projects, and the symposium Fountains Failures Futures: The afterlives of public art is a key part of our research process.

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WORKING PAPER

“Thomasson on campus?”

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Thomasson on campus?

Presentations from the Faculty of Engineering¹ at Lund University (where I teach architecture) almost always, in one or another way, include photos of the *LTH Fountain*. Even if the depicted object is the same, the images vary according to perspective, camera angles as well as colour tones, intensity, and graphic design in general. The irony here is that the *LTH Fountain*, a well-known local failure, has achieved emblematic status and represents a technical university with such frequency. The reason for this might neither be found in admiration of this “art-technological cathedral”² from 1970, nor in sarcasms about the same. Rather, the fountain’s photogenetic qualities have to do with its *neutrality*. Its cartesian geometry works as an unproblematic layering, or framing, of the surrounding campus and its greenery. In addition, the scale and location of the fountain certainly influences how it ends up in the eye of visitors to the campus. Here, we face a *real structure* that conveniently induces a range of different, but primarily technological, associations.

The fountain’s appearance is well anchored in a modernistic tradition, where its self-referential character constitutes the opposite to the type of object/sculpture that entails strong political opinions.³ This is important when considering the *LTH Fountain*’s type of malfunction. Traditional and historic monuments that, for instance, depict kings, dictators or other debatable ‘heroes’ from the past, have lost their function according to changes in ideological contexts. In comparison, the *LTH Fountain* demonstrates an almost pure operational malfunctioning rather than an ideological one. The essential flow of water was *almost* never there. Its remains are now just a huge iron construction, after its glass-encased water containers and some parts of the structure were taken away.

When I meet visitors to the campus or students from abroad, it’s significant that many of them don’t know about the *LTH Fountain*, an anonymous structure they happen to pass by now and then. From this perspective, discussion about the fountain enters the domain

¹ The Faculty of Engineering was formerly Lunds Tekniska Högskola, commonly abbreviated as ‘LTH’.

² The phrase “art-technological cathedral” is unofficially attributed to Jan Torsten Ahlstrand, former director of the Skissernas Museum in Lund.

³ There might be political opinions about the *LTH Fountain*, for example those that focus on how society spends tax-payer money.

of *unintentional leftover* – where the history, at least in the eye of the spectator, is hidden. When briefly released from the question of authorship or original context, the *LTH Fountain* shows resemblances to the type of objects that preoccupied the Japanese ‘Thomassonians’ in the 1980s. The front figure of this movement was the artist and photographer Genpei Akasegawa (1937 – 2014). Together with his students, Akasegawa documented useless urban leftovers – structures with a former function, discovered as part(s) of buildings or the built environment. In this context, Thomasson objects stand out as “strange objects that appear accidentally in the process of urban transformation”.⁴

Common examples of Thomasson objects are, for instance, bricked-up windows or stairs that lead to a dead end. In his book *Hyperart Thomasson*⁵, the term “hyperart” indicates a type of object that is even more *art-like* than art itself. Akasegawa also presented different subcategories of Thomasson objects such as sawn-off telephone poles or the gable imprints of houses that no longer exist.

The concept of Thomasson reveals a humoristic analogy to the assignment of American professional baseball player Garry Thomasson for the Tokyo club *Yomiori Giants* from 1981-1982. Thomasson’s highly anticipated career in Japan turned out to be a giant failure, and the record-breaking sum he was hired for didn’t make the situation any better. Borrowing Thomasson’s name, the approach in Akasegawa’s book also bears witness to a type of dry humour, but also an attitude not far from the Dada movement or the surrealists when it came to the finding of urban objet trouvés. The idea of Thomasson objects could also be derived from the concept *modernology* (kogengaku) that was coined by the Japanese architect and designer Wajiro Kon. Modernology could be described as a type of sociology that studied the changes in cityscape and people, which was developed when Tokyo grew into a modern metropolis in the early Showa Era (1926–1989).

In his book, Akasegawa briefly mentions “the capitalistic society”, but Hyperart Thomasson cannot be described in terms of a left-leaning political movement.⁶ Rather, Akasegawa and his students questioned the strong link between well-organised capitalism and

⁴ Nariai Hajime, curator, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (interview on 24 April 2023 with the author).

⁵ Genpei Akasegawa, *Hyperart Thomasson*, Tokyo, 1987.

⁶ Genpei Akasegawa, *Hyperart Thomasson*, Tokyo, 1987, p.6.

the societal flow of objects with specific functions. Here, their interest turned specifically towards what is left behind in a modern society. It is appropriate to say that “the idea of Thomasson was not a criticism of capitalism, but rather a play to enjoy capitalism in an artist’s own way”.⁷ Even if the Hyperart Thomasson movement, to some extent, was characterised with a sort of humour, it was on the other hand conceptualised by a set of rather strict rules and whether an object could be classified as a ‘true’ Thomasson.

The *LTH Fountain* was erected more than a decade before the Thomassonians were active. Akasegawa and his students didn’t know about this huge left-over structure in Lund, with its lost function. This is of course obvious since they were focusing on the contemporary Japanese context. Besides, the interest in a local sculpture failure outside of Sweden is necessarily limited. When I recently presented the *LTH Fountain* to some of Akasegawa’s successors, they were curious and interested but stated that the fountain is *not* a Thomasson. While there are several similarities between a Thomasson and the fountain, the major difference has to do with authorship and intention. The fountain was created as a piece of art in a collaboration between an artist and an architect. Whereas a true Thomasson has lost its everyday function, and the craftsman behind its construction is usually unknown. On the other hand, for those earlier mentioned campus visitors, for whom the *LTH Fountain* suddenly emerges as an anonymous structure, its appearance is very similar to finding a Thomasson.

My forthcoming video has the working title *Thomasson on campus?* and includes a series of interviews with Akasegawa’s successors and contemporary Japanese curators, as well as documented Thomasson objects in the Tokyo region. It seeks to contribute an intriguing background for a discussion about the *LTH Fountain* and its character.

⁷ Nariai Hajime, curator, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (interview on 24 April 2023 with the author).



A Thomasson in Bunkyo, Tokyo (2023). Photo: Lars-Henrik Ståhl.



A Thomasson in Roppongi, Tokyo (2023). Photo: Lars-Henrik Ståhl.