

Dag Alveng's New York

Dag Alveng's photographs of New York are like jazz. These images are built on rhythm, harmony, well-known phrases and unexpected structures in a way that is quite similar to that of improvised music. The multi-exposed photographs have strong references to classic street photography, but Alveng adds his own signature with the trademark interweaving of the time and space of several moments, a virtuoso play with words and architectonic elements as well as a sharp eye for the human figure.

Sticking with music terminology, we could describe what happens in these photographs as a visual syncopation. The experience of time and space is alternately being imploded, complemented and erased. The space of the metropolis, which in an ordinary, straight photograph is frozen and transformed into a slice of time, is in these images transformed into a relation between several visual situations, both intelligible and unintelligible at the same time.

Alveng consistently relates to people as organic elements within the fabric of the city. They appear in a dynamic and seemingly sympathetic fashion, although not as individuals, but as figures appearing in the social play unfolding in the streets. However, in these images the human figures also appear in another role. Parallel to the life on the street there is also the life on the surface of the image, where the figures appear in new, reformed and deformed constellations, created in the play between the different exposures.

Alveng's new series of images from New York, carrying the sweetish and perhaps ironic title "I Love This Time of Year", seems to be an attempt at balancing between two ways of seeing the city: on the one hand, the city as a manifold, human place characterized by great possibilities, and on the other hand, the city as a more threatening, ideological and political arena in which a battle of identity and cultural hegemony unfolds. The latter aspect is perhaps more developed than it has been in earlier work by

Dag Alveng, and in this regard parts of this series represent some of the most dramatic images he has created during his thirty year long career.

The concept is playful enough. Like in a kaleidoscope, Alveng has photographed the same motif four times, with the camera rotated 90 degrees for each exposure. This instantly creates various surprising visual situations. Sometimes the same figure or the same architectonic element appears four times in the same image. Sometimes a motif disappears only to reappear in an unexpected location. Unavoidably, new visual and social relations are created between elements united by the different exposures. And equally unavoidably, there is a fight between light and dark and between textures and structures, which in these images have the unique character of being genuinely photographic while at the same time moving in the direction of something synthetic or even, at times, something painterly.

The forerunner of this new series of quadruple exposures was the series "This is MOST Important" (1993-2003), which consisted strictly of double exposed images. This series also took the visual theater of the street as its starting point and had the same character of an exploration of the aesthetic and narrative effect of a layered and partly collapsing experience of time and space. However, in this early series, the camera was not tilted; it was pointed in different directions. And the movement of the camera was not symmetrically structured; it was structured according to visual interest. This created the same kind of complexity as in the new images, but the viewer nevertheless kept his or her feet on the ground; it was still possible to relate to the picture space, the street and the people as realistic elements.

In the new series, this humane complexity is still partly present. But the superimposed symmetrical structure – the cross-formed rotation – deprives us to a large extent of a firm foundation, and there is very little left of a realistic pictorial space. In many

of the images the foundation of the street is swept away from under our feet. In other images we experience four versions of the same street simultaneously, as if the city was turning around, or as if we ourselves were being thrown around.

It seems apparent that Alveng is introducing an element of drama into his view of New York City.

Could this be connected to the catastrophic day of September 11th, 2001? Perhaps, for at times in these images the buildings and the grey skies vibrate as if the whole city has been shaken hard. In other images it appears as if splinters are being thrown out from a shaken ground zero, or as if the city is imploding in a hole in the center of the image. Alveng creates a visual intensification which threatens to wipe out our impression of New York City as a humane meeting place.

In the next moment, the series nevertheless escapes from this slightly overdetermined interpretation. In the ruins the social play is, so to say, recreated. And there it has been all the time, latent, hidden in the heavy symmetrical structures, behind, in between and in front of the lights, street signs, trees and buildings.

As much as this can be interpreted as a personal view of New York City it is also to a large extent a technical-aesthetic experiment, a formal project. It could in other words be said to be a project in defense of the autonomy of art, while at the same time clearly expressing a documentary relation to urban realities. "I Love This Time of Year" thus appears not only as an attempt at uniting the humanist view of the city with the idea of the city as an ideological arena, but also as an attempt at uniting documentary photography with its semiotic counterpart, the constructed and manipulated image.

The joy of spending a lot of time on a photograph, discovering the different layers in small glimpses while at the same time being baffled by the surprisingly realistic relations between the different exposures, is an important aspect of "I Love This

Time of Year". Another important aspect is the relation to a third art form, as closely related to New York City as jazz and photography, namely film. For is it not in these images, as in the medium of film, a sort of cutting we experience? Four moments, one after the other, rearranged in order to create a new story.

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(translated from norwegian)