Exercices éventuels

Further crossroads, collaborations, and shortcomings.
Henrik Nygren Design 1991–2026

At the age of ten, he didn't know the difference between utopia and dystopia. Not that anybody expected him to, not even his parents, both of whom were schoolteachers. If his schoolmates on the island wanted him to help build a raft and sail to the mainland, he said no thanks. This could be understood as cowardice, or his not caring for their company, or a combination of both – or that the mainland wasn't alluring. In any case, he provided no explanation. The truth – that he would rather stay at home in peace and quiet, tidying up and sorting through the things in his room – he understood very well could be used against him.

Twenty years later, on the mainland, in the capital city, a year after starting his own company, when he was about to receive the industry's most coveted award for innovative design at its annual gala, he was not nervous. After all, nobody knew who he was. However, he realized that from now on more people would be trying to involve him in projects that could never succeed. It was a unique and infallible ability that he still retained, that of being able to foresee the consequences well before the blade reached the silk collar.

On his thirty-third birthday, he was given a book by a colleague he had begun working with. His colleague's inscription on the flyleaf informed him that the author had committed suicide at the age of thirty-three – which did not surprise him once he'd understood the book's premise:

A few people wash up on a desert isle after their ship has sunk. Their chances of survival are nil. Nightmares make sleep impossible. Venomous lizards slither at their feet, while blind, black birds circle in the skies above. No one even tries to dive down to the wreck and recover the chest of tools in order to build a raft and escape. Utter meaninglessness reigns.

During his unfolding journey of education, he closely observed the difference between utopias and dystopias. It was nothing so simple as the former ending well and the latter going to hell. The distinction interested him, for it had a bearing on what he did in his daily life, helping create success in various ways for his clients – providing them the coordinates for a glimpse of the Isle of Bliss.

Ten years passed before he published his first book. It too could be described as a dystopia. Or anyway, it was misunderstood to be one at the time. It showed how using forgotten graphic techniques and materials could make a difference for designers. And for clients. The book was a tribute to two honorable practitioners at the edges of the industry he was part of: the cliché plate maker and the letterpress printer. Both were headed towards closure, both victims sacrificed at the pixilated altar.

On his childhood island, there were also victims of a new era. During the industrial era, the island had flourished. A railway was built from a shipping harbor in the south to a terminus at the island's northern tip. In the middle was the island's major residential city. From it, boats left for the capital city. From the south harbor, boats left for ... the whole world. First you took the ferry to the mainland; there waited ships that sailed for lands of milk and honey. Eventually, the ships stopped sailing. A hundred years later, the autumn he was born, the last remaining meters of rail were torn up and taken to the scrapyard.

Once he had been making his mark on the industry for twenty years, an established publisher wanted to put out a book containing a long interview and all of his work. The result was a doorstopper, a huge brick of a thing which, brick symbolism notwithstanding, did not contain much about industrialism.

A shipwrecked sailor tries to create a meaningful life out of nothing on a desert isle – only to be rescued years later. He leaves behind a kingdom of bliss in miniature, as an aid to readers to see the failings of their own society. Over the years, boatloads of translations and reworkings of the original story are published. The intrigue can be varied endlessly. A German teacher retold the tale as a conversation between a father and his children, a dogmatic dialogue on right and wrong. A German Pietist believed the hero shouldn't dive for the sunken ship's toolbox – but instead fashion with his own hands the tools to make the tools he needed.

As the Earth grew smaller during the Age of Discovery and the world was flooded with printed accounts of great deeds, the utopian genre was quite simply forced to come into being. Nobody reading the books any longer believed that there were unknown desert isles. They had all been discovered and mapped. Thus heroes had to disappear into the interior of the Earth or to the moon or even farther out in the cosmos. Once the spatial possibilities were all used up, they had to fall asleep and wake up in the future. Such stories typically ended with the hero so repelled by the perfect, comfortable life of the future that he lies down to sleep, hoping to wake up in the present again. Since the most recent world war, modern-day desert island stories have often faced an unhappy ending with blind, black birds circling in the sky.

After thirty years of impact on the industry, he published a slimmer volume intended to shine a light on fruitful collaborations he had enjoyed, identifying sources of inspiration both within his near circle and further afield. These included major figures both living and deceased, whose creations were guarded by foundations and estates. The only one who declined to be included was an American artist legendary for his austere, deceptively simple sculptural forms. A reason for his refusal was never provided.

One of the heroes included in the volume was a Swedish art director and designer who was no longer alive. His family generously granted permission. Whether he was creating his countless exhibition catalogues for the capital city's museums of modern art or ad campaigns for major industrial firms, everything looked so simple and ... playful. Late in

life he poked fun at the pretensions of Art, photographing junk he'd found on the ground, printing postcards, traveling to art's capital city and sneaking his work into postcard racks at museums and bookshops. He called his project *Exercices visuels*. He went from a whole life of doing things for the world, to doing things only for himself.

His parents, still living on the island, grew old, and he went there more frequently to visit them. At the same time, he would look after his own house at the island's northern tip, not far from the railway's former terminus, an old harbor office that he had taken over and renovated with his wife. When he went alone, he usually brought along his cat for company. She too had grown old, but was still feared by the island's rodents.

On one such visit, walking through a wood at dusk, he suddenly came upon a heap of fallen trees he had not previously noticed. Their trunks were unnaturally straight, unnaturally squared-off and of equal length. He laid claim to the discarded railway ties – and the following day, had them sawn to exact lengths. He spent the rest of the weekend incorporating them into a design experiment based on junk found on the ground. He tried and tested, shifted the wood constantly into new combinations, became excited, feeling he was able to distinguish things on ... another plane.

He took a break for a few hours. When he came back and looked at the arrangements of wood on the floor, he realized it was impossible to distinguish them from the American artist's austere, deceptively simple creations, the one who had declined to take part in the thirtieth-anniversary volume.

He packed to take the evening ferry back to the capital city. The cat had slipped out after lunch and hadn't come back. Now he began worrying about missing the ferry. He found her under the storage shed, unconcerned about departure times and uninterested in design experiments, regardless of their originality.

The winds were strong, so he would not come home until after midnight. The family would be asleep by then. He had wanted to talk to his daughters. Now it would have to wait until tomorrow. Both daughters would soon be leaving the nest to pursue their own artistic life's work. He wanted to share an insight he had had on the island, something they should bear in mind. Specifically, that they can do things about the world, for the world – and they can do things about themselves, for themselves. But nobody will thank them if they wait too long with the latter.

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