

This text is published before the symposium:

## FOUNTAINS FAILURES FUTURES: THE AFTERLIVES OF PUBLIC ART

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Skissernas museum – Museum of Artistic Process and 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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Maddie Leach

# The monstrous Fontana di Träti

This text reflects on two images, paired here for the purpose of briefly unfolding the story of the *LTH Fountain* in Lund, Sweden. Anticipated as a modern “artistic-technological cathedral of steel, glass and water without parallel in the world,”<sup>1</sup> the object was a state-funded public artwork that was the collaborative vision of Swedish architect Klas Anshelm and sculptor Arne Jones. It is this fountain sculpture that has catalysed the research project *The Fountain: An art-technological-social drama*, and offers a foundational case study for the accompanying symposium *Fountains Failures Futures: The afterlives of public art*.



LTH-fontänen (1968). Mailis Stensman/Statens konstråd.

The first image I am looking at is a colour photograph taken by Mailis Stensman on 27 November 1968, and now in the archive of Statens konstråd (Public Art Agency Sweden). Stensman's photograph records a local event taking place on the purpose-built campus of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a description of the *LTH Fountain* posted on a Flickr page by Anders Bengtsson on 20 March 2012. It is unlikely these are his own words and appears to be an unattributed quote, possibly from Jan Torsten Ahlstrand, former Director of Skissernas Museum in Lund.

Lund Technical University.<sup>2</sup> The event is the first test-run of the *LTH Fountain*. The formal inauguration of the artwork, intended to be part of Lund University's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations some months earlier, had been postponed. Therefore, it is this date which marks the fountain's debut and the first public gathering to witness it in operation.

Stenman's photograph is taken looking east towards *E-huset* (E for Electrical Engineering) and *M-huset* (M for Mechanical Engineering). In his plan for the LTH campus, Klas Anshelm designed a brick building for each of the college's six technical subjects: Physics, Architecture, Road and Water Engineering, Chemistry, Electrical and Mechanical Engineering. An early concept sketch shows he initially arranged these buildings in an arc around two small bodies of water – ponds which would become the functional site for the *LTH Fountain*. In this composition, it is as if Anshelm employs *science* as a protective force field around his fountain sculpture. Conversely, one might imagine the fountain's central placement as *muse* – its presence intended to inspire students towards greater synthesis of technical knowledge, skill, and artistry.

In Stenman's photograph we see about 40 people gathered on a bare grassy bank that looks artificially sculpted with smooth, steep edges and newly seeded grass. The weather is November grey and damp, and those who have turned up wear coats and woolly sweaters. The crowd appears to be almost entirely composed of young men. Their backs are to us and many of them gaze expectantly upwards; clearly, something is happening.

Beyond the group looms a giant sculptural composition – the *LTH Fountain* – forming a network of branching, square-shaped, umbrella-like formations in steel and glass. The perspective Stenman employs in her image achieves the effect that the structure entirely dwarfs the university buildings in the background. It looks huge! One might speculate that, if not umbrellas, the sculpture might have been inspired by the shape of palm trees, satellites, or telecommunication towers. Despite its reliance on steel construction, the fountain is not without moments of formal delicacy. Its narrow pillars rise perilously upwards without any

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<sup>2</sup> Lunds Tekniska Högskola (LTH) was originally planned to be a technical college independent from Lund University. The architect Klas Anshelm was commissioned to design the first buildings for the college. LTH had its first intake of students in 1961 for a course in technical physics, and by 1965 it had six departments. In 1969, after only eight years of operation, LTH became a faculty of Lund University. As the university's Faculty of Engineering, it is still commonly referred to as "LTH".

cross-bracing, supporting expanses of glass the size of shallow swimming pools. One can quickly understand its design logic as a marvellous balancing act – a herculean, if skeletal, body effortlessly holding cubic volumes of water aloft.

On this day, after the pumps were switched on, the fountain's largest pool (atop an 11-metre pillar) filled in half an hour and water then flowed to the other basins. In Stenman's image we see movement, a single torrent of water gushes from the glass basin of the tallest tower to a smaller basin below it. It is noticeable, however, that water is also streaming from a corner of the basin; a clear sign of steady seepage where vertical and horizontal glass panes meet. The following day the newspaper *Skånska Dagbladet* joyfully reported that – if one ignored this leakage – everything 'fungerade fint' (worked fine)!<sup>3</sup>



LTH-fontänen (1978). Jan Carlsson/Bilder i Syd.

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<sup>3</sup> "Teknis vattensculptur provkörd – fungerade fint", *Skånska Dagbladet*, 28 November 1968.

The second image I am looking at is a black and white photograph taken by Jan Carlsson in July 1978, almost 10 years later. He positions his camera at the southern end of the fountain looking northwards. There is no water in the fountain and the scene is entirely devoid of people. The grey tones of his image capture the sense of quiet and emptiness that descends on university campuses in midsummer. Two shadowy leaves frame the left-hand edge of the photograph, as though the camera has been pushed through trees to get a better view. We see the same steeply sloped banks now covered by long scrubby grass and dense bushes, saplings have become small sturdy trees and a wrecked bicycle rests halfway down the bank. One gets the vague impression of a general unkemptness in and around the fountain. Something has happened – or rather *has not* happened – in the intervening years.

In contrast to Stenman's photograph of the test-run in 1968, Carlsson's image of the fountain is one of utter stillness. Yet, it offers a clear view of the fountain's overall gestalt. From this angle one can understand the structure as a unified sequence of horizontal *descents* and how the logic of *cascade* informs its design. Due to the transparency of its glass, at certain points the structure's rigid geometry disappears into trees and sky beyond, and there is an elegant S-shaped visual flow from one basin to the next. One gets the strong sensation that whatever is being held aloft must come down. One thing, however, appears different from the rest of the structure both formally and aesthetically. The lowest basin has a narrow, jutting, rectangular shape that has necessitated a crowd of four support pillars in rapid succession. Its side panels appear fortified, grimy, and lack the visual lightness of the basins above it.<sup>4</sup>

Jan Carlsson's image was published in the *Sydsvenskan* newspaper on 3 July 1978 to illustrate a short opinion piece written by local art historian and culture critic Jan Torsten Ahlstrand,<sup>5</sup> in which he rails against the forlorn state of the *LTH Fountain*. Headlined 'Bristerna blev ju avhjälpta' (The deficiencies were remedied), his article is followed by a terse response from Lars Uno Månsson on behalf of Byggnadsstyrelsen (National Board of

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<sup>4</sup> In 1970 the glass panels in the lowest basin were replaced with stainless steel sheet due to issues with breakage and seemingly deliberate sabotage with stones being fired at the glass by slingshot. The metal sheet noticeably changed the appearance of this basin in contrast to the other ten glass basins.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Torsten Ahlstrand (1938-2020) was a notable public figure in the Lund culture scene and served as Director for the Skissernas Museum in Lund from 1989-2005. In 1990 he organised the exhibition *Offentlig konst i Lund* (Public art in Lund) at the museum which included a discussion evening about the fate of the *LTH Fountain*.

Public Building) titled 'Svar: Klarar inte vind och vatten' (Answer: Can't handle wind and water).

Ahlstrand concluded his argument by posing three rather fierce questions to the official owner of the fountain – the state building agency who had accepted responsibility for care and management of the artwork in 1971. His questions succinctly capture the sense of frustration and pervasive mystery that hounded and haunted the fountain throughout the decade these two photographs span:

- 1) Exactly what is wrong with the installation's construction?
- 2) What is the basis for the claim that it would cost around SEK 1 million to repair the fault?
- 3) How is it that the fountain works, seemingly without interference, during test runs?

Månsson replies by painting a picture of a highly sensitive object that had performed with absolute inconsistency. Vulnerable to wind vibrations, stress loading, sealing failures and leakage when in operation, he insists the fountain has required continuous (costly) manual surveillance for the purpose of public safety. For Månsson, the fountain was a temperamental, uncertain, and potentially lethal object. As far as the building agency was concerned, the estimated costs to solve the problems were considered unaffordable and cheaper methods were yet to be identified. Their conclusion was to simply mothball the fountain's short-lived career as an artwork – or the artwork's short-lived career as a fountain – with the statement: *får skulpturen tills vidare stå som den gör* (for the time being, the sculpture must stand as it is).

By the late seventies the *LTH Fountain* had gathered a raft of nicknames around campus. Several of which reflected derisive perceptions amongst technology students of the sculpture as a kind of neurotic, upper class, operatic persona: *Fontana di Träti*, *Fontänen von Tänen*, *Fontänen Fontänen*. If not overtly feminised, its failure to perform, to be impressive and dependable, was quickly bound to its identity. Female characterisation has persisted in other contexts where it has also been called *en sovande Törnrosa* (a Sleeping Beauty).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Otto Ryding, "LTH-fontänen – en sovande Törnrosa", Kulturportal Lund, 31 October 2021.

However, an early description by local writer Viola Robertson stands in marked contrast to this melancholic, diva-like figure. In an opinion piece for the *Sydsvenskan*, Robertson prefers a direct lineage to Frankenstein, brutally skewering the artwork as *det fula åbäket*: an ugly, hulking, monstrosity; *grovt och klumpig* – rough and clumsy; something big, inconvenient and in your way.<sup>7</sup>

In her doctoral thesis, Swedish art historian Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe identified how public artworks commissioned in Sweden's *folkhemmet* (a term associated with the Swedish Welfare State over a 40-year period from the 1930s to 1970s) produced “a highly gendered power structure, as the practice of public sculpture became a male monopoly.”<sup>8</sup> The *LTH Fountain* is no exception. Driven largely by the artistic ambitions of Klas Anshelm, its story has unfolded around an almost exclusively male cast of characters. On occasion I've been told that Anshelm and Jones were close friends who drank together regularly, and the suggestion has been made that their fountain design was modelled on a champagne tower. It is a story that supports an image of male camaraderie, hubris, and social privilege, but one I also enjoy because it lightens weightier claims for artistic-technical virtuosity that have shrouded the fountain.

Yet, if we take these ambitions seriously, enacted through a distinctive modernist regime of geometric abstraction, scale, hierarchy, and industrial materialism – what future did the fountain anticipate? What optimism did it assume? What latent ideology did it rest upon? These questions become more interesting, and are made more complex, by the relative immediacy of the object's failure. It is not that its ambition failed slowly, gradually, a result of normal wear and tear. Rather, this object failed abruptly, clearly, publicly – in plain view of its originators, its commissioners, and champions.

Arne Jones died in 1976 and Klas Anshelm in 1980. Neither of them had liked to speak about the fountain's problems. However, Anshelm did make one final suggestion that all the fountain's glass could be replaced with sheet metal – a proposal which makes a significant aesthetic compromise and suggests a sense of giving in, if not exactly giving up.

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<sup>7</sup> Viola Robertson, “Tekniska högskolans tekniska fontän”, *Sydsvenskan*, 22 October 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Sjöholm Skrubbe's observation is quoted in *Public Art Research Report: A report on the current state of research on public art in the Nordic Countries, and in a wider international context*. Kjell Caminha, Håkan Nilsson, Oscar Svanelid and Mick Wilson. Statens konstråd, 2018.

Plagued by design issues and claims of repeated “vandalism” by slingshot and air rifle, by the mid 1990s both the cost of repair *and* the cost of removing the fountain were considered too high to be practicable. In a committed effort, a small group of local supporters and technology students organised one last public “drive” of the *LTH Fountain* on 18 August 1996. Jan Torsten Ahlstrand was there and described it as “Against all odds, the technology corps managed to bring about a final run of the fountain...It was a beautiful summer Sunday, and the event took the form of a folk festival with speeches and Verdi's Requiem roaring from the speakers.”<sup>9</sup> In his speech that day, LTH's rector Thomas Johannesson is reported to have declared: "It is not art that has failed, it is technology."

Twenty-seven years ago, these fountain-defenders argued for something akin to placing a body in cryonic suspension – a form of futureproofing in which the fountain would eventually be reanimated with technological solutions yet to be developed. One could say they anticipated the *taking up* of Anshelm and Jones's project by unknown future protagonists. At the time, the dilemma of what was to be done with the fountain ended in a decision that took the middle road. Neither repaired nor removed, the *LTH Fountain* was partially dismantled. Its glass components were taken away, but much of its skeletal structure was left intact.

This residual object has been ‘maintained’ by Akademiska Hus,<sup>10</sup> who are its official owners and see their role as one of occasional upkeep: trimming the surrounding vegetation and removing any posters attached to its columns. In this way, the *LTH Fountain* has been left to offer us an image, a sketch, a mirage of the idea of the fountain rather than an actuality. No longer the difficult, erratically leaking *Fontana di Träti* but not exactly its wreckage either, *what* it is – and *why* it is – has become harder to fathom. And, as knowledge of the drama that beset the fountain fades from public memory, it has also become harder to loathe and harder to love.

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<sup>9</sup> Jan Torsten Ahlstrand, “Universitet fontän eller laxtrappa?” *LUM: Lunds universitet magasin*, nr 3, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Akademiska Hus was formed in connection with the dissolution of Kunsliga Byggnadstyrelsen (National Board of Public Building) in 1992. On 1 October 1993, most Swedish university and college properties were transferred to the ownership of Akademiska Hus.