

Summary in English

THIS BOOK IS about Jan Widströmer (b. 1944), a Swedish visual artist, poet, art critic and college teacher. The subtitle of the book, *Av inre tvång och kärlek till konsten* (Out of inner need and love for art), is a quote from a letter in which Widströmer describes how he has continued to paint and make pictures in spite of little recognition and few opportunities to exhibit. For him, outer success has obviously been of much less importance than the “inner need” and the satisfaction of solving aesthetic problems. In the first chapter, *En privatman i konsten* (appr. “a private person as artist”) Widströmer’s social situation is compared to that of the poet Wallace Stevens, among others. Like Stevens, he has chosen to separate his artistic activities from the daily duties of a quite ordinary occupation. A closer examination of Widströmer’s art and of some of his statements and journalistic texts reveals a strong attachment to the programs and ideals of European avant-garde movements in the 20th Century, especially Constructivism. It is however misleading to describe him as a follower of any specific master, movement, trend or artistic ideology. His artistic work is much more diverse and his attitude more explorative than that.

IN THE CHAPTERS of this book, it is demonstrated how Widströmer’s artistic and literary production reflects different cultural, religious and aesthetic influences. To a certain extent, his development as a visual artist seems to be the result of a systematic exploration and variation of a limited number of compositional

principles. In the analysis of Widströmer’s visual artworks in chapters 5–8 it is assumed that his main production can be divided into four parts or groups (one for each chapter) which are defined by different principles. These four groups are not to be understood as chronological “periods” but rather as sets of patterns and ideas that are constantly recombined and reinterpreted. As a whole, the analysis is a combination of chronological, thematic and semiotic approaches. The semiotic approach means a more specific focus on the role of “signs” in visual art, in particular the symbolic significance of certain shapes and colors.

THIS BOOK ALSO aims to clarify Widströmer’s role and position in the local community in which he lives and works. A separate analysis in chapters 3–4 of his activity as an art critic further aims to clarify his aesthetic and ideological views. Widströmer’s art criticism reveals both an openness towards different art forms and alternatives, and a pronounced scepticism regarding the intellectual claims and pretensions of Post-Modernism in the 1980’s. Widströmer’s literary production as a poet is the topic of chapter 9, which is written by the literary historian Niklas Schiöler. Schiöler especially stresses the importance of nature and of sensory perception as a source for motives and images in Widströmer’s poetry. Historically and stylistically, he situates Widströmer quite firmly in a Modernist, Swedish tradition. This tradition is often associated with the Swedish term *centralpoesi*, approximately

“central lyricism” or probably *diction d’un émoi central* (Roland Barthes).

WIDSTRÖMER GREW UP in Malmbäck, a small municipality in the region of Småland, in southern Sweden. Widströmer’s parents had strong intellectual and cultural interests. His father worked as a public school teacher (*folkskollärare*) in Malmbäck, and his mother gave piano lessons at home. Both of the parents also came from families in which the religious piety typical of this part of Sweden used to be important. However, the cultural rather than the religious atmosphere determined Widströmer’s future path. Already as a teenager, he dedicated much of his time to drawing, painting and poetry. He was especially fond of drawing caricatures. During his military service in Stockholm in 1965–66 he had better opportunities to befriend other youngsters with similar interests. In their free time, Widströmer and his new friends used to paint and go to concerts together.

HAVING THUS BECOME more independent from his family and childhood environment, Widströmer also started to travel abroad and to visit important art museums. At this point he could have chosen the insecure path of a free artist by applying for entrance into an art school. He decided, however, to use his gifts for theoretical studies in order to get a teaching position and a steady income. As a student at Gothenburg University, he completed majors (MA, *filosofie magistereexamen*) in English and Comparative Literature. Unlike his father, an ordinary public school teacher, he also received the license to teach at college (*gymnasium*) in 1971. He moved with his

wife Kerstin (who is also a teacher) to Falkenberg in the region of Halland in 1974. In his student years he had however continued ceaselessly to paint (often in oil on hardboard) and to write poetry. During periods of intense poetry writing, he had had his first experiences of the phenomenon of automatism, i.e. of writing without the interference of conscious will. These experiences became decisive for Widströmer’s attitude to philosophy and religion. Philosophically, he distanced himself from the materialist and rationalist world-views that dominated both in capitalist and socialist countries at the time.

FROM 1979 UNTIL HIS retirement in 2009, Widströmer worked full time at the *gymnasium*/college in Falkenberg. There, his main subjects as a teacher were English, Swedish and Comparative Literature. He also did additional exams at Gothenburg University in order to teach History. During almost 40 years in his civil profession, he however continued to develop his skill as a self-taught artist in his spare time, which meant a tight schedule of evening and holiday work. The results of this artistic work came to public attention first in the early 1980’s. He had then established a contact with the gallery owner Walter Pettersson in Falkenberg, and exhibited at Pettersson’s *Galleri Flamingo* in 1980, 1983 and 1989.

THE 1983 EXHIBITION FEATURED ink drawings from Widströmer’s poem and picture book *Boken till dig* (The book for You) which was released the same year. In these and later ink drawings, Widströmer developed a style which he himself has termed “emblematism”.

Drawn with a fine line pen with the aid of ruler and protractor, the “emblematic” compositions are both geometrical and symbolical. They are characterised by finely drawn gratings of straight lines – a technique inspired by observations of light reflections. This technique gives rise to a variety of optical effects. Combinations of recurring symbols or “emblems” express certain existential and spiritual aspects of life and nature. References to music and to musical composition are also frequent in these works.

DURING THE FIRST half of the 1980’s, Widströmer continued to produce new “emblematic” ink drawings and to develop a special technique for spray-painting with acrylic and lacquer mediums. In the acrylic and lacquer paintings from this period, ordinary brushwork is also used. The compositional structures are geometrical, and transparent layers of colour create radiant and prismatic effects. For the most part, the production from this period is akin to “abstract art”, but “emblematic” elements are also used. In later series of pen, crayon or ink drawings, as well as acrylic paintings, elements of a more dynamic kind dominate. Stylistic influences from Cubism, Surrealism and Asian calligraphy are discernible in some of these series. In Widströmer’s production after year 2000, musical influences, informal abstraction and lessons drawn from Abstract Expressionism predominate. Three painting series called “musical movements”, “transcendental studies” and “arabesques” are of special interest here. After 2010, Widströmer has also returned to some of his earlier and more geometrically based composition methods.

BETWEEN 1984 AND 1991, Widströmer wrote art criticism on freelance basis for the regional newspaper *Hallandsposten*, based in Halmstad. Chapter 2 of the book is a short essay by Widströmer, *Konstkritiken i fokus* (“Art criticism at a closer look”), originally published in *Hallandsposten*. Widströmer’s double role as artist and art critic in the Halland region and his attitude to art criticism as a journalistic genre is analysed in chapter 3, entitled *Anteckningar om Jan Widströmers konstkritik* (“Observations about Jan Widströmer’s art criticism”). In the analysis, a number of his articles are read closely in order to give a representative account of the topics, geographic areas, artistic techniques and genres covered in the text corpus as a whole. The identification of stylistic and rhetorical devices in the texts is made with reference to an established descriptive model of the main elements or functions of evaluative cultural journalism. According to the model, an evaluative “review” of any cultural artefact consists in description, interpretation, contextualization and evaluation (Burke Feldman, 1966). In geographic terms, Widströmer’s assignment for *Hallandsposten* meant that he was to some extent restricted to reviewing art exhibitions in Falkenberg and in the neighbour town Varberg. This was especially the case during the first years of his assignment. Already then, he however wrote articles with a wider scope and with references to important topics in contemporary culture and society.

WIDSTRÖMER’S SCEPTICISM TOWARD market forces in the art-world is evident in a series of short essays published in *Hallandsposten* in 1985.

These essays cover a variety of topics, including the history of European landscape painting and the emphasis on surface and decoration in contemporary culture. Taken together, they nevertheless aim at a critical discussion of Post Modernism, its philosophical claims and its manifestations in visual art. As Widströmer sees it, the uncritical use of popular culture and mass media in some Post Modernist contexts is a sign of more fundamental ideological and economic changes.

THE EXHIBITION “Implosion”, at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in the autumn of 1987, was an attempt to present and explain the phenomenon of Post Modernism in art. Widströmer reviewed the exhibition and its catalogue in *Hallandsposten* and exposed what he regarded as signs of intellectual dishonesty in both. According to Widströmer’s analysis, “Implosion” was little more than a covert propaganda piece for rewriting the history of 20th Century art in accordance with the interests of American cultural politics and neo-liberal ideology. Widströmer contends that the denial of originality and individual expression in Post Modernism corresponds to the ideological denial of rational planning and debate in the public sphere. Everything is reduced to mere appearances, and “Narcissus has been buried with solemn celebration, still to live on as copies of the human Gaze”, as Widströmer writes in the article. (*Narcissus har begravts under högtidliga former, för att ändå leva som betraktande kopior*).

WHILST THE “Implosion” review might lead one to suspect that Widströmer was sceptical

towards all art and all theory associated with the era of Post Modernism, his reviews of such artists as Joseph Beuys, Walter De Maria and Mogens Møller shows quite the opposite. Widströmer was able to separate the artists from the intellectual trends surrounding them. A partial reason for the end of Widströmer’s contract with *Hallandsposten* was possibly a column of his, written in reply to a local celebrity who didn’t like Joseph Beuys. Unluckily, Widströmer’s reply angered the powerful former editor of the culture section.

THE SHORT CHAPTER 4 of the book, entitled *Att mäta konstkritikens anatomi* (“To measure the anatomy of art criticism”), presents a method for quantitative text studies. It has been applied to the corpus of Widströmer’s art criticism. The method is based on counting the instances of adjectives and adverbs in all texts and dividing them according to a taxonomy. In the taxonomy, one category comprises words that imply unambiguous value judgments. Other categories have a more descriptive function; for example naming material features, describing emotional response and showing specialized cultural knowledge. To a certain extent, it is possible to automate the measurements with the aid of available applications for text analysis in the Digital Humanities. A comparison between the Widströmer corpus and measurements of art reviews from different newspapers in Finland and Sweden in the 1950s and 1990s seems to confirm that Widströmer dedicated more than average space to critical evaluation and historical contextualization in his texts, thereby coming through as an outspoken art critic who expected some effort and afterthought

from his readers. One might view Widströmer's art criticism as an example of a sociological conflict between two opposed roles of local art critics: On the one hand to sanction and confirm local culture, and on the other to stimulate new influences and debate. These chapters about Widströmer's art criticism are parts of the research project *Konstkritiken och det nationella* ("Art Criticism and the National") at Åbo Akademi University.

CHAPTER 5, *En emblematisism växer fram* ("The genesis of an emblematisism"), deals with visual artworks by Widströmer related to his definition of the "-ism" in question. The earliest of these "emblematic" pictures are from 1970s and the latest from around 2009. A salient feature of Widströmer's "emblematisism" is the constant variation and exploration of a limited number of patterns and shapes; this method is akin to the combinatory geometry of Constructivism, but involves figurative symbolism and iconographic emblems in a decidedly non-constructivist manner. In a late series of paintings made in conjunction with a written explanation of "emblematisism", Widströmer retains four basic emblems. These are the face in profile for *Human/Angel*, the receiving hand in profile for *Action*, the foot for *Movement* and the butterfly for *Escape*. Four basic colours constitute a combinatory logic: Black for *Darkness*, white for *Light*, grey for *Matter mixed with Light* and red for *Life*. The use of the four emblems can be traced back to the aforementioned "emblematic" ink drawings featured in the book *Boken till dig* from 1983. However, the basic stylistic features of Widströmer's "emblematisism" are salient already in works from the 1970s, such as *Christus Triumphans*

(picture 19 in the book). Apart from the mentioned ones, many other emblems and symbols occur in Widströmer's "emblematic" works. Some are of Chinese origin, such as the *yin-yang* symbol and the written character *Tao* (path of wisdom).

THE EMBLEMS AND their combination in different formal arrangements provide keys to their interpretation in terms of mythological and philosophical notions. This is however true also of certain "emblematic" colours and shapes in the pictures. Of utmost significance is a compositional "cell" based on four triangles within a square (see picture 23). With the repetition and variation of this and other "cells" as a generative principle, Widströmer constructs abstract patterns in analogy with compositional structures in different kinds of music, such as the fugue of 18th Century church music and the *raga* of Indian classical music. However, the "4 + 3" structure also has a cosmological meaning for Widströmer. It refers, for example, to the symmetry of the calendar year with four seasons/triangles, each with three months/sides. In a painting series called *Årstider* ("Seasons"), the recurring cycles in nature are interpreted as visual analogies, made exclusively by means of repetitions and variations of the basic square- and triangle "cell" with different combinations of colours.

IN CHAPTERS 6, 7 AND 8 the genesis of other compositional principles in Widströmer's visual art is similarly described. The principles sometimes occur in a parallel fashion in the same work. Chapter 6 is entitled *Kaleidoskopiska brytningar* ("Kaleidoscopic refractions"). The title refers to

the kaleidoscope as a common metaphor of the relationship between stochastic and deterministic processes (or "chaos and order") in laws of nature. Some paintings by Widströmer from the 1980s are analysed as examples of a principle of subdivision that is quite different from the repetition and variation of certain "cells" and "emblems". Instead of being determined by such "cells", the "kaleidoscopic" compositions have developed from projected lines or rays that divide the surface according to certain mathematical proportions. Further subdivision and addition of lines and curves gives rise to a rich variety of prismatic shapes, some of which are saliently coloured in order to create differentiations between spatial layers in the picture. This compositional principle was used in many of Widströmer's works from the 1980s and it is still visible in his recent works.

THE ANALYSES IN Chapter 7 demonstrate yet another compositional principle, based on graphic or "calligraphic" brushstrokes. Consequently, the title of the chapter is *Natur, kalligrafi, flöde* ("Nature, calligraphy, flow"). In the tradition of Chinese and Japanese ink painting, drawing and colour are not treated as separate elements as in most European art, but united in an aesthetic of calligraphic "gestures" which are expressive both of the bodily "flow" of painting and of organic rhythms in Nature. It is evident that this tradition was decisive for the "calligraphic" principle in Widströmer's art. It seems that he first started to explore it in a series of large crayon drawings on paper from the 1980s. Another series of drawings from around 1990 are drawn/painted with a mixture of black ink and black acrylic colour on

paper, which results in a more purely calligraphic style. In a series of acrylic paintings from the mid 1990s, united around the common theme *Havet* ("the sea"), black calligraphic elements create undulating and water-like rhythms in combination with white, grey and red areas. Later on, a series of paintings in exclusively grey, black and white have a similar compositional structure. After 2010, the aforementioned series called "arabesques" combine calligraphic elements and ornamental patterns.

CHAPTER 8, *Musikalitet och transcendens* ("Musicality and transcendence"), describes another development, roughly parallel in time to the "calligraphic" one. It starts with a series of pencil drawings from the 1980s. In some of the drawings, "swarms" or clusters of tiny pencil marks create wave-like movements suggestive of organic structures. In other drawings the overall structure is similar, but with long and continuous curves of varying thickness and direction as the basic compositional elements. Similar curves dominate a large series of paintings created in the 1990s. Widströmer has described them as manifestations of "an inner impressionism", i.e. of interpretations of memories from nature. The common denominator given in the titles of all paintings in the series is "landscape". The use of curves as a device for expressing various emotions and moods is vital for Widströmer's realization in his art of what he himself has termed a "transcendental" approach. The term "transcendental" can here be understood in Kantian terms as an explorative zone which is not possible to map within an ordinary conceptual framework or established systems of representation. This warrants a language that is

“abstract” in the sense that it provides means to express feelings and immaterial qualities more directly. In several series of paintings executed between 2000 and 2010, Widströmer refines his use of dynamic and gestural curves in order to express “abstractly” his inner *moods*. However, the compositions may also be evocative of *modes* of music. The major artistic achievements of this period are the series *Musical movements* and *Transcendental studies*, examples from which are described and analysed in detail at the end of the chapter.

IN CHAPTER 9, *Om Jan Widströmers poesi* (“About Jan Widströmer’s poetry”), Niklas Schiöler starts with an analysis of the poem *Hjärtats röst* (“The voice of the heart”) from the poem- and picture book *Boken till dig*. Here, Schiöler observes a sentiment associated with romanticism; as the poet realizes the inadequacy of language for interpreting “the voice of the heart”, invocations of silence and meditations on language itself become recurring themes. The scarcity of Widströmer’s style and his preference for short formats such as the Japanese haiku is a consequence of this attitude. Furthermore, Schiöler describes Widströmer as a typical observer and probably a typical “painter” in his poetry. The senses are constantly in focus, and as the words of the poet express his reactions to things seen and felt, the basic mood of the closing words is often that of melancholy. Melancholy follows as an existential reaction to the transience of nature’s beauty and of life. Schiöler stresses how “the gaze and the reaction” and “nature and melancholy” are fundamental points of reference for Widströmer as a poet, and how he uses nature as a

rich source for his written metaphors and symbols. The importance of nature and of metaphors is of course a characteristic feature of romantic poetry in general, and not the least for a number of Swedish poets in whose works Schiöler finds many parallels to that of Widströmer. In particular, Schiöler refers to Vilhelm Ekelund, Gunnar Ekelöf, Lars Englund and Tomas Tranströmer. He also identifies older forerunners such as Erik Johan Stagnelius, and international ones such as Thomas Hulme, Ezra Pound – and the 16th Century Japanese poet Arakida Moritake. In a manner similar to the works of Gunnar Ekelöf and other poets influenced by symbolism and surrealism, there are in Widströmer’s poetry elements characteristic of a secular mysticism. In contrast to apophatic mysticism, definable only in negative terms, the mystical imagination of Widströmer is closely related to the senses and to metaphorical thought.

AS SUMMARIZED IN the *Slutord* (“Final words”) at the end of the book, a common feature in Widströmer’s production as both a visual artist and a poet is probably a phenomenological attitude to the world and its events; it is not a question of exposing facts, but of registering how experiences and sense impressions affect one’s state of consciousness. The illustrations of this book reproduce nearly 200 visual artworks by Widströmer. Of these, 181 works are included in the list of figures, with information about technique, format and date. The list of written sources include a full catalogue of Widströmer’s reviews and articles on art.