



**MIJA RENSTRÖM**



**FRÅN OSS / FROM US**





BOOK WITH DOCUMENTATION IMAGES FROM WORKSHOP 98: SJÖFALL  
 PHOTO: MIJA RENSTRÖM 1998

## INTRODUCTION

From 1997 to 2003, Mija Renström held three workshops on photography at residential treatment centres for mothers and their children. The centres aim to support women and their relationships to their children. The three projects were designed as active collaborations with transparent preconditions and frameworks for the participants' interaction. The women's participation was always voluntary. From the outset it was agreed that the photographs would be shown at exhibitions or other public venues.

Mija Renström worked out a method in which the planning and content of the work with the images could be used in the treatment at the centres. She created new opportunities for the staff to broach sensitive subjects by using pictorial language communication, both individually with the assignments the women were given, and in groups with the discussions of the images. In addition, the projects gave the treatment centres a chance to let the women participate in team work and give presentations. When the participants attended the exhibition opening, the commitment of the parties involved was fulfilled and the project concluded.

In her early photographic work, Mija Renström took an interest in the female self-image. Exploring the relationship between mother and daughter, the point of departure for her autobiographical images was often her own family album. Later, she became interested in using photographs as a means of accommodating the voices of others.

Representing the stories of others in photographic images entailed new working methods and problems. Mija Renström was confronted with various aesthetic considerations in relation to the issue of representation in the documentary photography genre. This important theoretical discourse deals with the uneven balance of power between the photographer and the subject, with the photographer having the upper hand. It has been pointed out that the conceptions of the photographer influence the depiction of the subject. In other words, an image relates a story from the perspective of the photographer rather than from that of the subject. There is no given method to be used in order to avoid these pitfalls, so Mija Renström experimented with different ways of conveying and depicting the stories of the projects. She also regularly evaluated and critically questioned her own work.

This catalogue will give a brief insight into two of Mija Renström's comprehensive bodies of photographic work at the residential treatment centres. These

are complex projects that comprise many different approaches and can be interpreted on many levels. They raise important questions of how to convey and depict other people's stories, as well as questions of processes in long-term artistic collaboration projects. At the same time, they touch upon issues of copyright and power relations, and challenge established views on female identity.

**Mia Zeeck**



COMMEMORATIVE BOOK WITH IMAGES OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN WORKSHOP 98: SJÖFALL EDITION: 7; ONE FOR EACH PARTICIPANT.

ABOVE: GROUP IMAGE ON THE WAY TO THE EXHIBITION AT THE HASSELBLAD CENTER 1998.

LEFT TO RIGHT: SUSANNE KARLSSON, SUSANNE EKDAHL, UNKNOWN, LISETTE JOHANSSON, MIJA RENSTRÖM, MARIE KARLSSON, RINA OLSSON AND INGVIOR JOHNSON.

BELOW: SPREAD FROM MARIE KARLSSON'S CHAPTER.

PHOTO: MIJA RENSTRÖM 1998



THE RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT CENTRE SJÖAFALL'S MAIN BUILDING  
PHOTO: MIJA RENSTRÖM 1997

The residential treatment centre welcomes mothers and children with psychosocial problems. The treatment period is normally between one and two years and is commissioned by the social welfare service. The treatment centre has its own day care centre and school.

The treatment is individually designed for each family with the purpose of supporting mothers in their roles as parents and with their relationship problems. The work is done both individually and in groups. Great importance is attached to involving fathers and other key people in the clients' networks. The daily work is undertaken in a therapeutic community spirit with the staff. In addition, the mothers and children have access to external psychologists when necessary.

**Susanne Ekdahl, treatment assistant, Sjöafall**

## IMAGES OF US / IMAGES FROM US

In 1997, Mija Renström began a collaborative project with Susanne Ekdahl, treatment assistant at the residential treatment centre Sjöafall. The collaboration was planned as a one-year workshop on photography for the mothers at the centre.

**Mia Zeeck:** Why did you choose to do a project at a treatment centre?

**Mija Renström:** When I met Susanne in the summer of 1997, we started talking about the framework for a collaborative project. I thought I might do it as my degree project at the School of Photography at Göteborg University. The year before, I had taken photographs at a summer camp for children and I thought it would be interesting to work within the confines of an institution, and to use the building and the people as a framework for a project. The treatment centre offered such confines. I was interested in taking my earlier explorations of the relationship between adults and children a step further.

At the treatment centre, the women are fighting to keep custody of their children. I wanted to explore a place where mothers struggle not to abandon their children. I was also curious about how to actively use images in therapeutic treatment.

**MZ:** Your earlier work was largely

autobiographical. What implications did it have for you, starting to photograph other people?

**MR:** I had reached a point where I felt I had finished with my own story and I was curious about how one goes about depicting and relating other people's stories through photography. Suddenly I was no longer a photographer who worked with identity, family pictures and a family history, but a documentary photographer. I was confronted with a new set of problems which meant I had to deal with a new set of aesthetic considerations. These thoughts struck me already when I was working at the summer camp. I thought a lot about the power relationship between me and those I was going to photograph. At the summer camp, I photographed children but I also gave them disposable cameras they could use themselves.

First, I thought I'd work in a similar way at the treatment centre. However, in contrast to the children at the summer camp, the women at the treatment centre were in a controlled environment. If I had photographed them in this environment, it would have meant a kind of double surveillance. I didn't want to do that. I couldn't do it, because of the circumstances. That's why I had to work out a new strategy for my photographic work. There were no established working methods so I had to experiment.

**MZ:** From the outset, you thought of the project as an active collaboration. Did you also have a clear idea of how to design the workshop?

**MR:** Yes and no. Susanne and I chose the workshop model for several reasons. One of them was that the educational element of a workshop made it clear what I as an artist had to offer the treatment centre and the mothers, in exchange for them allowing me to take photographs for my degree project. I would take pictures of personal stories but I would also give something in return. Another reason was that I wished to create a space for their voices, in my work. I didn't want to talk about them or for them.

I had already decided that my work should focus on the private image and the family album. Looking at my preparatory notes for our first meeting when I introduced myself to the staff, I realise that my idea was to design the project as a photography class. I was going to give lectures in everything from the history of photography and art to photographic techniques. I was going to demonstrate various ways of taking photographs, they were going to take photographs, and we would select the images together. What I hadn't worked out in such great detail were all the practical matters: how often we were going to meet; if they were going to take photographs individually or in groups; and what my role would be in the discussions of the

pictures. In retrospect I realise that I was uncertain about the nature of my role, apart from being a photographer. I was going to hold lectures and supervise the photographic work, but I wanted to separate Susanne's and my roles in the discussions of the pictures.

**MZ:** So, you were able to connect the themes and assignments of the workshop to your own photographic work on female identity and self-image, family and the relationship between mother and child in very a concrete way. How did you then proceed to carry out the workshop at the treatment centre?

**MR:** I explored different avenues and developed my method as I went along. This gave me an opportunity to get to know the group and adapt the assignments to their requirements.

When Susanne told the mothers that I was going to do a photo project with them, they said they wanted to learn to take better family pictures. That's why I decided to make our first meeting into a workshop. I gave them some basic tips and assigned them to take photographs of themselves. They also began working on creating their own family albums. The mothers spent two days taking photographs, and were given a wall each in the recreation room where they could put them up. The images were given more worth when they were hung on the walls. It also made it easier for us to

view the pictures and talk about them. An added bonus was that the staff and the children could come in and look at them afterwards.

Susanne and I developed the manner of presentation into a method. The participants put their pictures on the wall; we discussed the pictures in the group, starting with the photographer who described her intentions, followed by feedback from the group. This was a way of practising how to give and take criticism, and how to introduce oneself. Lastly, everyone chose an image each that I enlarged for our next meeting.

I showed them still lifes from photo books and assigned them to make still lifes of their own for our next session. It worked well and we continued in this way. I gave them new assignments and brought photo books and other material for inspiration and reference. I showed them many photographic historical images, fashion books and slides of works by contemporary artists who work with women's issues in different ways. While this was going on, they continued working with their family albums.

**MZ:** Could the staff at the treatment centre use the workshop in their therapeutic work?

**MR:** Yes, in many ways. After our first meeting, I realised that it was very important to fully involve Susanne in the project. The images triggered off

animated discussions that Susanne could refer to in the therapeutic work. She was also able to channel the processes started by the individual work and the group discussions to other members of staff.

Among other things, the photo project created a possibility for the mothers to participate in team work in a natural way. The work included many important elements, such as daring to learn something new, dealing with setbacks and failures, asserting oneself, and not least participating in and accomplishing a long-term project as a group. The work with the family album was an excellent way of highlighting their family stories and situations.

The presentation method developed by Susanne and me - to put pictures on the walls and discuss them in groups - was very useful. For example, while working with self-portraits, we could broach subjects such as the role of women, the role of mothers, and sexuality.

**MZ:** You didn't want to photograph the women at the treatment centre. What images did you select for the exhibition?

**MR:** At our first meeting I took photographs of their pictures on the walls. Already at our second meeting I told them that I wanted to document their presentations, but I was very unsure about how to present the



INSTALLATION VIEW FROM THE EXHIBITION WORKSHOP 98: SJÖAFALL  
INDEX, STOCKHOLM 1999  
PHOTO: MIJA RENSTRÖM 1999

material. I thought a lot about whether to make the institution identifiable or not. There are so many preconceived ideas about treatment centres and I didn't want them to overshadow the project. Partly it was a matter of protecting the participants.

At Documenta X, I encountered Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler's work. For years, they collaborated with a group of mentally handicapped people. It gave me inspiration and courage to continue. I came to see my photographs of the mothers' presentations as my interpretation of the project and their stories. I

began to include more and more of the room and the surroundings. My images show the mothers' own stories in the environment of the treatment centre where they were conceived. Finally, they also show my story and my interpretation of what takes place there. The images tell stories on different levels, which appeals to me.

My photographs were exhibited at the Hasselblad Center in Gothenburg. Everyone came to the opening and it was very relaxed. We looked at the exhibition for a while and then went out to celebrate. I gave the mothers a commemorative book each with each



RIINA OLSSON 980228  
WORKSHOP 98: SJÖAFALL  
© MIJA RENSTRÖM 1998

other's images of our work together.

**MZ:** After your first project, you did two more. Why and how did they differ from the first one?

**MR:** I felt there was more to explore. Even though I worked in a similar way in the other two projects, the conditions were different for each workshop. The second project, in 2000, was at the treatment centre Almestrand, which meant that I worked with another institution, new staff and another group of mothers. It takes time to learn to know each other. During the familiarisation period, I find out how the group works and I adapt my working method accordingly. At Almestrand, I tried to create *mise-en-scènes* with the group. That was something I hadn't done with the first group. I wanted to go a step further and challenge myself. At the same time, it was a greater challenge for the mothers because it required a well-functioning team effort.

In 2002, four years after the first project, I returned to Sjöafall for another workshop with Susanne. We both thought that the collaboration provided several opportunities that could be further developed. Now we had some experience and we looked for a greater challenge. The women we worked with in the first project had moved on, which meant we had to work with a new group of mothers. Initially, Susanne and I used the same method as before, but the

discussions after the presentations weren't as constructive as in the first workshop. The group dynamics were completely different and the mothers had different backgrounds. We needed more activity in the group and decided to work with paraphrasing.

**MZ:** How did you do that?

**MR:** I brought photo books and other material as in the earlier projects. They chose a picture each that they wanted to recreate, and we analysed its content. The responsibility for the props was shared by the participants and the whole group came up with ideas for technical solutions or alternative approaches. Has anyone got a hat? Has anyone got a pair of dungarees? How do you make the baby look like it's dangling? And so on. The work with the paraphrases boosted their self-confidence. There was this sudden release.

**MZ:** In what way?

**MR:** It was like everything fell into place. Suddenly they realised how you construct a picture and what codes you use to convey different messages. For me it was a fantastic experience. In the beginning they were cautious and unsure about using the camera, but now their imagination ran wild and they knew how to go about visualising their ideas. At that point we asked them, "If you were to tell us about your own lives now, what images would you use?"



LOTTA ZIMMERMAN/ *BABY SITTINGS 1*  
WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL  
© MIJA RENSTRÖM 2003

PARAPHRASE ON *BABY SITTINGS* BY SUE PACKER

REFERENCE IMAGE:  
*BABY SITTINGS* BY SUE PACKER



DOCUMENTATION IMAGE:  
 SUSANNE KARLSSON / PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY. WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL  
 PHOTO: MIJA RENSTRÖM 2003

They were on a roll as they started describing their lives in pictures. They created long stories which we helped to cut down to one or two scenes each. This was mainly due to lack of time. In the course of the project, the treatment centre was regrettably sold and we had to conclude the workshop earlier than expected. That's why we had to do all the scenes in two days.

Even if one person had come up with the original idea for the picture, I thought it was important to emphasise that everyone had been involved. Everyone took part in some way. Someone took care of the makeup, someone organised the costumes or the props, someone else managed the lighting, and so on. I always took responsibility for the camera. I photographed and helped select the images.

**MZ:** This way of working, what does it mean for you as an artist? What photographs do you consider to be “yours”?

**MR:** This new way of working placed me in an uncertain position in terms of copyright. I have decided that I have the copyright to the photographs but I always account for who has the copyright to the ideas for the scenes. In the two first projects, I photographed the mothers' presentations on the walls. Those photographs were obviously mine. But then I became more interested in visualising more of the processes that evolve in the course of the projects. In a different way than before, I came to view the working process as a part of the artistic work. I looked for ways of depicting it, which involved experimentation.

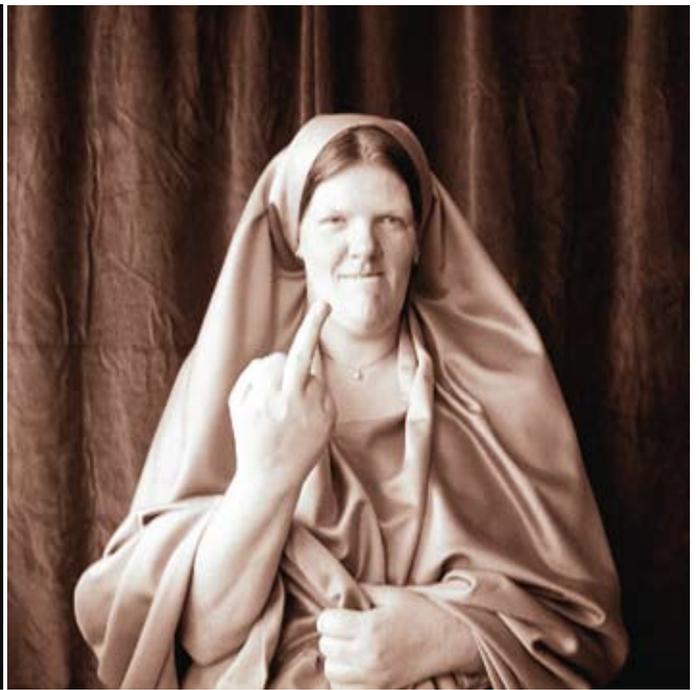
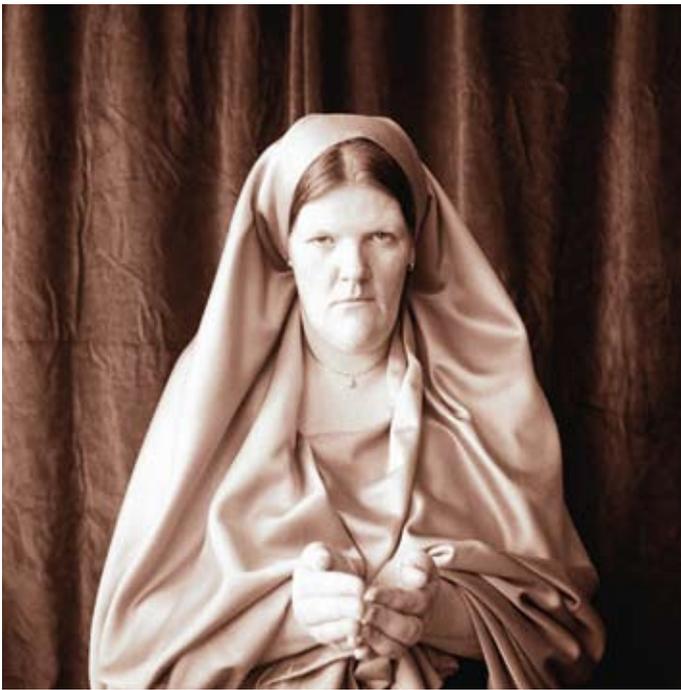


SUSANNE KARLSSON / PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY  
 WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL  
 © MIJA RENSTRÖM 2003

PARAPHRASE ON PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY LENNART NILSSON /  
 STUDIO MARIE



REFERENCE IMAGE:  
 PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY LENNART NILSSON / STUDIO MARIE  
 PHOTO: MIJA RENSTRÖM 2003



*EVA-LOTTA KARLSSON/ ST AGNES  
WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL  
© MIJA RENSTRÖM 2003*

*PARAPHRASE ON ST AGNES FRESHWATER/1864 BY JULIA MARGARET CAMERON*

*PARAPHRASES:*

I BROUGHT PHOTO BOOKS FROM WHICH THE PARTICIPANTS CHOSE PICTURES THEY WISHED TO CREATED PARAPHRASES ON.

WE MADE EVA-LOTTA'S PARAPHRASE FIRST... SHE PICKED ONE OF JULIA MARGARET CAMERON'S IMAGES. USING THE RECREATION ROOM AS OUR STUDIO, WE PUT UP A LINE ON WHICH WE HUNG PIECES OF MATERIAL. THE MATERIAL DRAPED AROUND EVA-LOTTA IS A GOLD-COLOURED CURTAIN. EVERYONE IN THE RECREATION ROOM PARTICIPATED IN THE PREPARATIONS. SOMEONE ARRANGED THE CREASES IN THE MATERIAL, SOMEONE CHECKED THAT EVA-LOTTA'S HANDS WERE IN THE RIGHT POSITION AND THAT HER FACIAL EXPRESSION WAS CORRECT. I MOUNTED THE CAMERA ON A TRIPOD SO EVERYONE HAD A CHANCE TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS.

*MIJA RENSTRÖM*



LOTTA ZIMMERMAN / SELF-PORTRAIT  
WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL  
© MIJA RENSTRÖM 2003

IDEA AND MISE-EN-SCÈNE: LOTTA ZIMMERMAN



MISE-EN-SCÈNE:

LOTTA'S IMAGES ARE A DIPTYCH. IN THE IMAGE TO THE RIGHT, LOTTA AND HER SON SIT AT THE KITCHEN TABLE. SHE IS WEARING A BLACK T-SHIRT. SHE IS MAKING AN IMPORTANT PHONE CALL, WHILE FEEDING HER CHILD AND TRYING TO EAT AT THE SAME TIME. ON THE TABLE IN FRONT OF HER IS HER ORGANISER. THE KITCHEN IS IN A MESS. THE PINK SUGAR BOWL HAS TIPPED OVER AND HER KEYS ARE ON THE FLOOR.

IN THE IMAGE TO THE LEFT, LOTTA IS WEARING A WHITE T-SHIRT. LIGHT IS POURING IN THROUGH THE WINDOW. SHE IS IN TOUCH WITH HER SON. ON THE TABLE IS A WOMAN'S MAGAZINE, SYMBOLISING THE IDEAL WOMAN'S AND FAMILY LIFE.

ALL STAGED SELF-PORTRAITS WERE MADE IN A SINGLE DAY. THE TIME SPAN BETWEEN THESE TWO IMAGES IS APPROXIMATELY TEN MINUTES.

MIJA RENSTRÖM

**MZ:** Why did you choose the title Från oss / From Us for this exhibition?

**MR:** My point of departure for this project was a desire to explore alternative strategies for a photographer who tries to relate other people's stories. Every workshop was an attempt in this process. In this exhibition, I show images from both Workshop '98 and Workshop '03, so you can see how the process evolved gradually from the first to the last project. I have learnt a lot in the course of the work. The paraphrases and the mise-en-scènes could not have been realised without the experience gained from the first workshop. In a conversation with Göran Dahlberg on my first project where I took photographs of the mothers' pictures,

we touched upon the fact that my photographs convey an image of all of us who participated in the workshop. In the last project, however, the participants themselves are clearly the authors of the pictures' messages. In collaboration with me, they selected images that we staged. That is why the photographs of the last project convey an image from us at the treatment centre. These collaborations involve both giving and taking. I set out with plenty of energy and a wish to tell something about photography and to show that it is possible for them to do something on their own. They, on their part, gave their pictures and their stories. In the end, the images are from us who worked together at the treatment centre.



INSTALLATION VIEWS FROM THE EXHIBITION FRÅN OSS/FROM US  
STENASALEN, GÖTEBORG MUSEUM OF ART, 2006  
PHOTO: KRISTER ENGSTRÖM 2006

CV

**Education:**

1998 MA, School of Photography and Film, Göteborg University

1996 BA, School of Photography and Film, Göteborg University

**Exhibitions:**

2007\_SOLO

Sireners sång, Soft, Oslo [NO]

Från oss / From us / Meistä, The Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki [FI]

2006\_SOLO

Från oss / From us, Swedish Travelling Exhibitions, Gävle Konstcentrum, Gävle

Från oss / From us, Stenasalen, Göteborg Museum of Art, Gothenburg

2006\_WORKSHOP, LECTURING & OTHER

Workshop for three days with teachers in connection to the exhibition

Från oss / From us, Göteborg Museum of Art, Gothenburg

Workshop for three days with teachers in connection to the exhibition

Från oss / From us, Gävle Konstcentrum, Gävle

Curator of New Nordic Photography, Hasselblad Center, Gothenburg

2005\_SOLO

Människor som utmanar samhället - Workshop 05: Grunden Media,

Frölunda kulturhus, Gothenburg

Sireners sång, Glasburen, the University of Stockholm, Stockholm

2005\_GROUP

Contemporary Craft, Röda Sten, Gothenburg

Showroom, the Museum of Bohuslän, Uddevalla

The Extended Field of Photography, Preus museum, Horten [NO]

2005\_ WORKSHOP, LECTURING & OTHER

Lecture as part of a class in contemporary art for teachers, Moderna Museet,

Stockholm

2004\_ SOLO

Workshop 00: Almestrand (co-produced by the Swedish Travelling Exhibitions and Xpo September), Kulturhuset, Stockholm

2003\_SOLO

Workshop 00: Almestrand, Kammaren Galleri 54, Gothenburg

2002\_GROUP

Tilanteita, Nordic Photographic Centre, Uleåborg [FI]

Structures, Sparwasser Hq, Berlin [DE]

2001\_SOLO

Akershus kunstnersenter, Oslo [NO]

Bloated blobs, Galleri Leena Kuumola, Helsingfors [FI]

2000\_GROUP

Parallell, the Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki [FI]

Spread, Index, Stockholm

**Grants:**

2004\_The Visual Arts Fund, 2 years

2003\_IASPIS studio grant, Stockholm

2001\_The Visual Arts Fund, 1 year

*EDITOR & WRITER: MIA ZEECK*

*GRAPHIC DESIGN: KARIN PERSSON / MERMERMER*

*PROOFREADING: GÖRAN DAHLBERG*

*TRANSLATION: HANS OLSSON*

*REPRO: CECILIA GRÖNBERG & MIJA RENSTRÖM*

*PRINTING: MUNKREKLAM*

*ISBN 978-91-633-0110-0*

*WWW.MIJARENSTROM.COM*

*THANKS TO CHARLOTTE BYDLER, SUSANNE EKDAHL, INGVIOR JOHNSSON  
AND ANNA LIVION-INGVARRSSON.*

*AND A GREAT THANKS TO ALL PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE GIVEN ME THEIR TRUST:*

*WORKSHOP 98: SJÖAFALL - CATHERINE BERNDTSSON, LISETTE JOHANSSON, MARIE KARLSSON,  
RINA OLSSON AND SUSANNE TORNERG.*

*WORKSHOP 00: ALMESTRAND - MARIA HAGER, NINA SÖDERSTRÖM, MALIN SÖRMAN  
AND MALIN WIDBERG.*

*WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL - SOFIA HALL, EVA-LOTTA KARLSSON, SUSANNE KARLSSON  
AND EVA-LOTTA ZIMMERMAN.*



*WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL AND THE EXHIBITION FRÅN OSS/ FROM US WERE SUPPORTED BY IRISSTIPENDIET, IASPIS AND BILDKONSTNÄRSFONDEN.*

*THE EXHIBITION WAS PRODUCED BY THE SWEDISH TRAVELLING EXHIBITIONS.*

*THE CATALOGUE WAS PRODUCED WITH HELP FROM WIKANDERS STIFTELSE, GÄVLE KONSTCENTRUM AND GÖTEBORG MUSEUM OF ART.*

*ISBN 978-91-633-0110-0*

*COVER*

*FRONT:*

*SOFIA HALL 030529*

*WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL*

*PHOTO: MIJA RENSTRÖM, 2003*

*BACK:*

*WORKSHOP 03: SJÖAFALL*

*PHOTO: MIJA RENSTRÖM 2003*

*LEFT TO RIGHT: EVA-LOTTA ZIMMERMAN, SUSANNE EKDAHL, SOFIA HALL, EVA-LOTTA KARLSSON, SUSANNE KARLSSON AND MIJA RENSTRÖM.*

